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APRIL/MAY 1995 NO. 8

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APRIL/MAY 1995 ISSUE 8



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Making
a Rumpot

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Cover photo and inset, Ellen Silverman.
This page: top, Tony Morse; middle, Ellen Silverman,
bottom, Matthew Kestenbaum.

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If you're seeking an outlet for your thoughts on topics like our most recent baking article, genetically engineered tomatoes, or your food and cooking philosophies, look no further. Send your letters on these and other topics to Letters, *Fine Cooking*, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506.

HOW TO BUILD A WOOD-BURNING OVEN

In response to Nan Crocker's query about wood-burning ovens in Letters, *Fine Cooking* #5, excellent plans for a backyard oven are available from Alan Scott, Ovenscrafters, 5600 Marshall-Petaluma Rd., Petaluma, CA 94952.

A listing of North American manufacturers of masonry heating systems, some of which feature ovens, as well as about 50 stovemasons may be obtained from the Masonry Heater Association of North America, 11490 Commerce Park Dr., Reston, VA 22091.

My own company, Masonry Stove Builders (RR5, Shawville, Quebec J0X 2Y0), manufactures a wood-burning masonry heater that has been optimized around a brick oven. It's suitable for someone planning a new house or renovation, and it replaces a standard masonry fireplace.

—Norbert Senf,
Shawville, Quebec

YOU'VE GOT THE WRONG DUCK

The article on foie gras in your December/January issue (*Fine Cooking* #6, p. 37), incorrectly named the ducks at the feed pump as Muscovy ducks, when in fact they were Pekin ducks. This may seem neither here nor there, but there is one important difference.

All domestic ducks, except Muscovies, are mallard derived. That is to say, some thousands of years ago, people began to tame wild mallards and, by selective breeding, produced a food resource that would not fly away in the fall when the weather got cold. Since mallards are migratory, they have evolved with a metabolism that accumulates and lays down fat rapidly. This fat sustains the birds on long, arduous migrations.

Muscovy ducks, on the other hand, are derived from nonmigratory South American tree ducks. They do not get fat. Thus, Pekins, Rouens, and the other "fat" ducks are for foie gras and confit, while Muscovies are for magret.

—Fred Pullman,
conservation and
wildlife consultant,
Little Compton, RI

Editors' note: We passed this letter to Ariane Daguin, of D'Artagnan, a native of Gascony and leading foie gras distributor, who is author Wayne Nish's supplier.

Ariane Daguin's reply: You are right about the photo: these ducks are definitely Pekins (or Long Island style ducks, as they're called in New England).

However, your statement about which ducks are for foie gras and which are for magret is not entirely correct. It is true that migratory birds (of mallard descent) tend to gorge themselves before migration, creating their foie gras naturally, to be able to store fat and calories during their long journey. Also true is the fact that nonmigratory tree ducks, Muscovy ducks (or Barbaries in France) are better known for their fabulously large thoracic capacity, and thus tend to have a beautifully large-muscled breast.

But most of the foie gras in the world comes from a duck that encompasses the best of both breeds: the Moulard duck, which is a cross between a Muscovy drake and a Pekin hen. This man-made "mule," which is sterile, gets the magnificent foie gras from his Pekin genes, and the excellent breast (or magret) from his Muscovy side.

By the way, in France, only the breast of a duck that has produced foie gras can by law be called magret (also spelled magret). Any other breast of duck has to be simply called breast.

—Ariane Daguin, co-owner,
D'Artagnan,
Jersey City, NJ

SALMON IS BETTER WHEN IT'S WILD

I was rather shocked to read Christer Larsson's recommendation of farmed salmon rather than wild salmon in his otherwise excellent article on gravlax

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Writing an article

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in your December/January issue (*Fine Cooking* #6, p. 52). As a commercial salmon fisherman living in a coastal community in British Columbia (with dozens of fish farms in our immediate area), I can only conclude that Mr. Larsson has been badly misinformed about both wild and farmed salmon.

When commercially blast-frozen, wild salmon is as parasite-free as farmed salmon. However, farmed salmon are unhealthy salmon. They are fed antibiotics and chemical feeds throughout their life cycle. Farmed salmon are also crowded together by the thousands in small pens and hardly move during their life. They live amidst their own waste and many of these poor creatures die and float on the surface of these pens. Their flesh is soft and mushy and, as workers in a fish processing plant have witnessed, they are subject to discoloration and internal diseases.

The infinitely preferable wild salmon range thousands of miles during their nomadic four-year life cycle, building firm flesh while they live on natural feed. Fresh and fresh-frozen wild salmon are by far the preferred salmon for sushi in the Japanese market and for the French restaurant market. Surely these fastidious buyers are intensely interested in parasite-free flesh.

Mr. Larsson's recommendation to use farmed salmon for his gravlax is analogous to using canned vegetables or processed cheese for gourmet recipes.

My wife and I have made gravlax for many years and have employed wild sockeye salmon to produce a premiere red-colored, firm, parasite-free product. I highly recommend that Mr. Larsson make a comparison test, and I am sure

he will not fail to note the satisfaction of his patrons.

—Richard Gross,
Sointula, BC

Editors' reply: We were unable to contact Christer Larsson before this issue went to press, so we can't speak for him, but we would like to point out that the primary reason given for using farmed salmon was to minimize the risk of parasites, which are found only in fish that spend part of their life cycle in fresh water. Commercially blast-frozen wild salmon is Mr. Gross' preference and was, in fact, recommended by Mr. Larsson, but not all consumers can buy it in their local markets. For those cooks who don't wish to risk parasites, farmed salmon is the next best choice, since home freezing destroys the texture of the fish.

FOOD IRRADIATION IS SAFE AND BENEFICIAL

I realize that the subject of food irradiation seems controversial, but that is only because there is a small cadre of "natural," antiobjective fanatics who get lots of press because they help sell papers and TV news-entertainment segments. In reality, there is no controversy. Food irradiation is an exceedingly safe, nonaltering form of sterilization. It is the first major improvement in food preservation in centuries.

Think about it—all other forms of food preservation alter the product significantly in one way or another. Radiation makes practically no gross change in the food, and it leaves no significant residue of any kind; especially no potentially dangerous residue like salt or nitrates. It is practically the "answer to a

maiden's prayer" as far as safety and effectiveness go.

The only arguments come from those few who are hysterically and irrationally opposed to any positive use of modern science technology, especially anything to do with radiation.

For objective, scientific information, I refer you to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), specifically to an article in the *AVMA Journal* of January 15, 1994, pp. 167–168. I am sure you can get further information from the association by calling 800/248-2862. I suspect you can get information from the AMA also, but in all honesty, experts in veterinary medicine probably know more on this subject than those in human medicine. A computer search of Medline could well turn up some references in this area.

Consumers, especially the professional consumers who read *Fine Cooking*, need objective information in this area. This is, quite literally, a life and death matter.

—D.B. Cameron, DVM
Middleburg Heights, OH ♦

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Peachy Pork Picante

Coat one pound cubed boneless **pork loin** with **taco seasoning** brown in a little **oil** in a skillet. Add an 8-ounce jar of **salsa** and 4 tablespoons **peach preserves** to skillet, stir to mix well, cover and lower heat. Simmer gently for 15 minutes. Preparation Time: 25 minutes. Serves four.

Nutrient Information, Approximately, per Serving: Calories: 263, Protein: 24 gm., Fat: 9 gm., Sodium: 762 mg., Cholesterol: 70 mg.

Nutrient analysis done by The Food Processor 11 Diet Analysis Software. Pork data from USDA Handbook 8-10 (1991).





Pork Piccata Sandwiches

Coat 4 **pork loin** cutlets well with **lemon pepper**. Heat **butter** to sizzling in non-stick skillet. Brown cutlets quickly on both sides. Place cutlets on sandwich buns; serve with **lemon wedges** and sliced **tomatoes**. Preparation Time: 15 minutes. Serves four.

Nutrient Information, Approximately, per Serving: Calories: 341, Protein: 31 gm., Fat: 10 gm., Sodium: 369 mg., Cholesterol: 85 mg.

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Have a question of general interest about cooking? Send it to *Fine Cooking*, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506, and we'll try to find a cooking professional with the answer.

SALTED, NOT SALTY, WATER

How much salt is "salted water?"

—Robert Kinnison,
Las Vegas, NV

Molly Stevens replies: Salted water is essential for cooking pasta and vegetables. Too little salt will result in excessively bland foods, and too much will overwhelm and mask flavors, but the proper proportion will heighten the taste of the food and improve its texture. The amount of salt will vary somewhat depending on the type of salt you use and on your personal tastes. Try adding salt until the water tastes close to sea water—only mildly salty.

Ordinary table salt is saltier than the kosher salt preferred by many cooks. A safe guideline is 1 teaspoon table salt (or 1½ teaspoons kosher salt) per quart of water. When cooking pasta, some chefs recommend adding salt in proportion to the amount of pasta. In this case, use a scant teaspoon table salt (or 1¼ teaspoons kosher salt) per 8 ounces of pasta.

A good shortcut for measuring salt is to first measure a teaspoon and pour it into your cupped hand. Make a mental note of how full your hand is. Next time, simply measure the salt with your hand. Most hands hold 1 to 1½ teaspoons.

The measurement of salt for salted cooking water need not be exact, and it's more important for some foods than for others. Always cook pasta in well-salted water; tender vegetables do well with little salt. Use less salt for long-cooking vegetables, because the salt content will concentrate as water evaporates.

Molly Stevens is a chef/instructor at the New England Culinary Institute in Essex, Vermont.

HOW TO MAKE DARK GRAVY

How do you get a dark gravy?

—John Sneider,
Asheville, NC

Priscilla Martel replies: Gravy has three elements, all of which can contribute to color: liquid (stock, water, wine or any

combination of these); a thickener; and—for best results—the natural juices of the meat that the gravy will be served with. Pan juices from roasted meat or poultry and the caramelized crust in the roasting pan are perfect for making a flavorful sauce. The longer meat juices cook, the darker they become. "Dark" doesn't mean "burned," however; pan juices should be watched for scorching.

Stock is a good color source. If you use a hot oven to brown the bones and vegetables you use in your stock, you'll get rich, dark results. If you don't have stock on hand, you can simmer water (and a little wine, if you like) and add a charred onion to the liquid. The onion will add color and flavor to the liquid. (To char an onion, cut it in half horizontally and put it, cut side down, in a dry cast-iron skillet over high heat for about five minutes.) Let the liquid simmer for at least twenty minutes before straining.

You can also brown the flour you'll use to thicken the gravy. To do this, spread half a cup of flour on a baking sheet and toast it in a 450°F oven, checking it every five minutes to make sure it browns evenly. Be careful not to let the flour burn or you'll ruin the taste of the gravy.

You also can make dark gravy with unbrowned flour by making a dark roux. A roux is a thickener made from equal amounts of fat and flour. Heat the fat, add the flour, and cook over medium heat, stirring constantly until the roux becomes a deep nut brown. This roux will give gravy color and a deep, nutty flavor, but it won't thicken quite as well as a roux in which the flour hasn't been cooked as much.

To make a classic meat gravy, remove as much fat as you can from the meat's roasting pan. Then set the roasting pan on the stove over medium heat (be sure to use a heavy-duty pan) and sprinkle some browned flour over the pan juices. Stir vigorously to combine and loosen any browned bits. Still stirring, add a little hot liquid to deglaze the pan. The gravy will thicken immediately. Continue stirring and adding liquid until the gravy reaches the correct consistency.

You also can produce a clear, dark gravy without flour by simmering the charred onion with stock and pan juices. Strain the liquid and use cornstarch to

thicken it, or reduce the strained liquid until it reaches the proper consistency. *Priscilla Martel is a food writer and the former chef at Restaurant du Village in Chester, Connecticut.*

WHAT TO DO WITH SHISO?

I've grown some green shiso and need some recipes in which to use it. Do you have any suggestions?

—Barbara Harley,
Laguna Beach, CA

Steven Petusevsky replies: Shiso is a popular herb in Japanese cooking. Although shiso belongs to the same family as mint and basil, it smells completely different. You can use shiso leaves—as well as the buds, flowers, and seeds—as a garnish or a condiment. Shiso leaves are high in iron and calcium and help build blood hemoglobin. Look to Japanese cookbooks for suggested recipes. Here's one of my recipes that uses shiso leaves. I use it to dress vegetables and strong salad greens.

SHISO VINAIGRETTE

Yields about 1¾ cups.

½ cup white miso
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 tsp. minced fresh ginger
1 Tbs. shiso paste or puréed shiso leaves
1 Tbs. dark sesame oil
2 Tbs. brown-rice or rice-wine vinegar
1¼ cup water
1 Tbs. sugar
2 tsp. hot chile paste with garlic (optional)

Combine all the ingredients well in a blender or a food processor.

Steven Petusevsky is the director of creative food development for The Unicorn Village & Restaurant Marketplace in Aventura, Florida.

CROSS-CULTURAL SAFETY OF TROPICAL OILS

Why are tropical oils such "no-nos" in the United States, when in "third-world" countries, coconut and palm oils are the oils of choice?

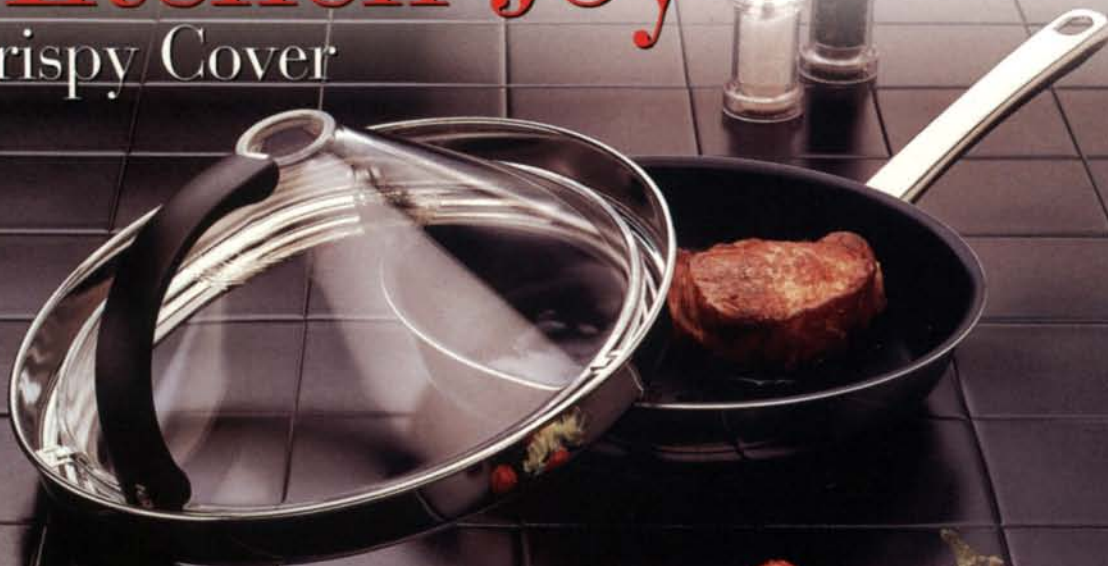
—Bill Moran
San Diego, TX

Mary Abbot Hess replies: For a long time, American manufacturers were fond of using coconut, palm, and other tropical oils in packaged foods because these oils help maintain crispness longer than other oils. But with America's

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burgeoning awareness of restricting dietary fats, that rationale isn't enough, because the use of tropical oils has been shown to raise cholesterol levels. Also, it isn't difficult to make substitutions when unsaturated oils (canola, for example) are readily available.

When it comes to using tropical oils in underdeveloped nations, the population often lacks the option of "healthier" oils—or the concern about using saturated fats. In short, they don't care about it as much as we do because they can't or don't have to. Since they usually burn tropical oils' fat calories as part of their daily diet (rather than storing those calories as fat), their blood fats are at much less risk. The diet and exercise patterns of people in third-world nations are often healthier than our own.

Mary Abbot Hess, a registered dietitian, is the author of The Healthy Gourmet. She is the vice chairman of the American Institute of Wine & Food and the president of Hess & Hunt, a nutrition communications firm in Winnetka, Illinois.

FAT-FREE COOKIES AT HOME

Fat-free cookies are on store shelves; can I make them at home?

—Glenn Wehtje,
Auburn, AL

Amy Cotler replies: Fat-free cookies can be a challenge; the trick is finding a way to replace the satisfying mouth-feel that butter provides. Applesauce and prune purée are popular fat replacers in home-baked sweets. These products can't be substituted one-to-one for butter, but they're used in many low-fat cookie recipes.

Meringue cookies are another option; these egg-white-based sweets look sumptuous and have satisfyingly gooey centers, but they're absolutely fat-free. Since butter is the ingredient that gives cookies crispness, it's easier to find recipes for soft and chewy fat-free cookies than for ones that are crisp. If you crave crisp cookies, remember that cookies are inherently small portions; one cookie doesn't contain many fat grams.

A good recipe source is *Have Your Cake*

and *Eat It Too*—200 Luscious Low-Fat Cakes, Pies, Cookies, Puddings, and Other Desserts You Thought You Would Never Eat Again, by Susan Purdy (Morrow, 1993). Amy Cotler works as a spa chef and teaches at Peter Kump's New York Cooking School.

CLEANING DISCOLORED ALUMINUM COOKWARE

The water from our well has a lot of iron and is very hard, even with an iron filter and a water softener. When I boil water in aluminum cookware, a black discoloration is left on the sides and bottom of the pot. Is there an easy way to clean this discoloration?

—Walter Woolard,
Greenfield, IN

Nancy Pollard replies: Cream of tartar is your best bet for cleaning aluminum discolored by hard water. You can add a tablespoon per quart of water and boil the water in the discolored pot for ten minutes, or you can combine cream of tartar and water to make a paste and use



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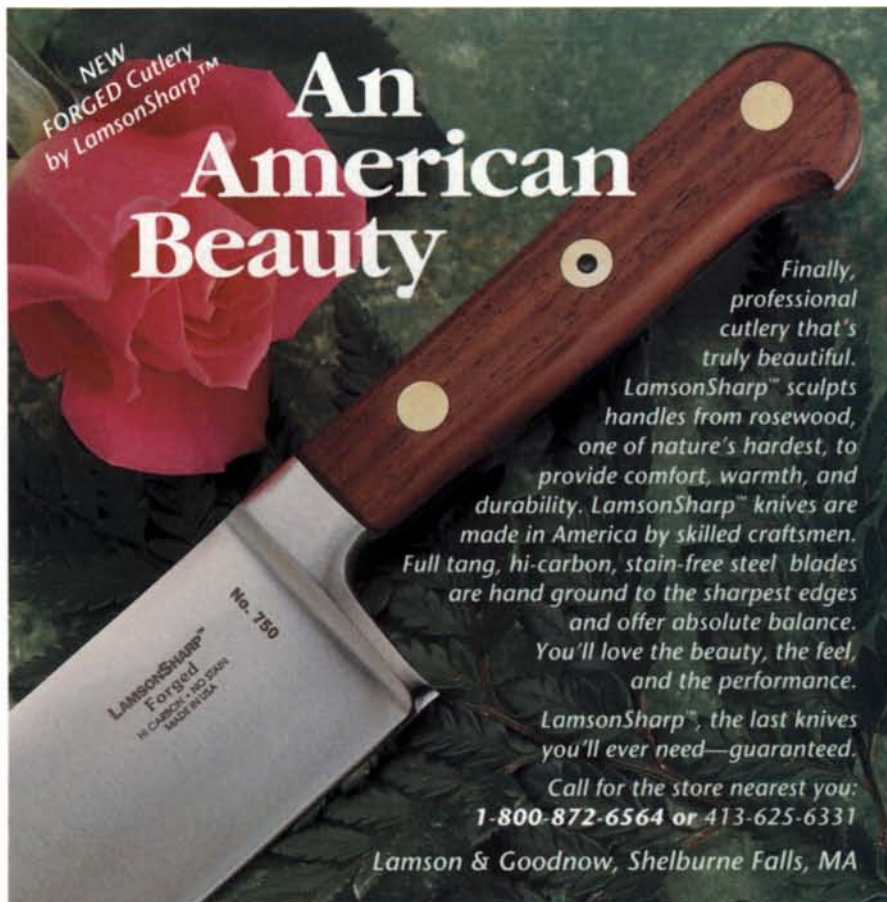
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New York Chefs left to right: Jonathan Waxman, Ark Restaurants; Anne Rosenzweig, Arcadia; Bobby Flay, Mesa Grill and Bolo; Sarabeth Levine, Sarabeth's; David Burke, Park Avenue Cafe; Stephanie Pietromonaco and Richard Pietromonaco, S Juzzi.


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Nancy Pollard is the owner of La Cuisine Cookware, a store in Alexandria, Virginia.

KEEPING AN EDGE ON KNIVES

I have a terrible time keeping my knives sharp, and I've noticed that they make a scraping sound on plastic boards.

Are wooden boards better for keeping knives sharp?

—Sharon Howard,
Royal Oak, MI

Jack Saunders replies: Both plastic and wooden boards can be appropriate cutting surfaces. While I prefer using a well-maintained board of fine maple, a medium-density plastic cutting board—one that shows the scrapes and scratches of cutting—also works well. Plastic boards that are thin, hard, and don't show

wear will dull your knife because they're as hard as or harder than the knife itself. *Jack Saunders is the director of marketing for Lamson & Goodnow, a knife manufacturer in Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts.*

WHEN THE TOFFEE BREAKS

I make many batches of English toffee, but last year I ran into a problem. Four batches—one after another—were ruined when, upon reaching 260°F, the butter separated from the sugar and I couldn't get it to recombine. No factors were different from when I created my successful batches. I've asked food professionals, but no one seems to know what happened, although some said they'd had the same experience. Can you tell me why this happens so I can avoid a disappointing and costly reoccurrence?

—R.M. Wiseman,
San Diego, CA

Mark Gray replies: It's difficult to know exactly what went wrong, but here are a few possibilities:

• There's too much water in your butter.

Water can make butter-and-sugar syrups break. If you use a generic brand of butter or salted butter, you may be using a product with too much water and not enough butter solids. Make sure you use a high-quality butter with a high percentage of butter solids.

• You didn't cook the syrup long enough.

Sometimes the syrup will seem to break just before it reaches the soft crack stage (270°F). Cook the syrup just until it reaches 270° and take it off the heat immediately. (Watch the heat closely—the syrup's temperature tends to "shoot" between 260° and 265°.) When the syrup is off the heat, stir it slowly to recombine. At this point, everything should pour out smoothly.

• When all else fails, make caramel sauce.

Even if your toffee utterly fails to behave, don't throw it out. Add milk, cream, or half-and-half to create the world's best caramel sauce.

Mark Gray is a confectioner for New World Chocolates in Asheville, North Carolina. ♦

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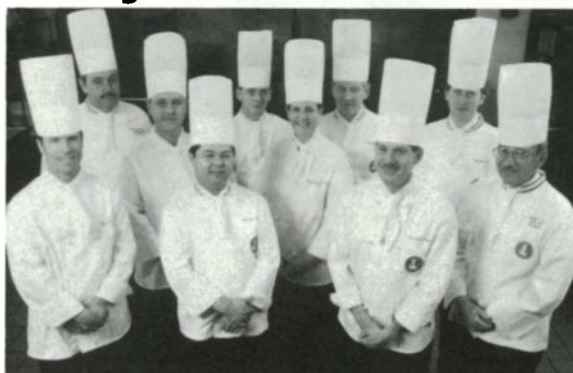
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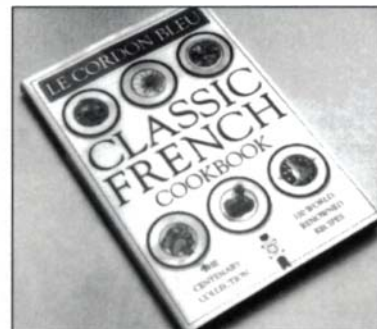
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Real Demi-Glace in a Jar

It's always the same dilemma. You know that rich, concentrated homemade veal demi-glace will produce fabulous sauces, soups, and braises, but who has the time to shop, chop, simmer, skim, strain, and reduce? Yet the alternatives to homemade are never up to snuff. Happily, there's a new product that resolves the dilemma deliciously.

Demi-Glace Gold has all the elements of the labor-intensive original and contains no preservatives or artificial ingredients. It is quite simply brown veal stock, with a little flour as a binder, reduced to a gelatinous, firm consistency. It has a low moisture content and high acidity (from tomato and red wine), so unopened, it has an 18-month unrefrigerated shelf life. The product can be used in three forms—concentrated as a meat glaze (*glace de viande*), reconstituted to make a rich sauce base, or diluted to use as a stock.

When I opened the jar, the deep, rich aroma and silky, sticky texture announced that Demi-Glace Gold was in a league above any existing ready-made sauce base. So rather than compare it to other instant sauce bases, I decided to compare it to a homemade demi-glace. To use Demi-Glace Gold, add water and simmer while whisking for about six minutes. The recommended water-to-product ratio is 3:1, which I found to be too concentrated. It made a forcefully beefy sauce that left a gluey film in my mouth. A 5:1 ratio produced a more balanced sauce base with a

bright shine and silky texture that wasn't excessively thick after simmering. It was, in fact, smoother and clearer than homemade (even after straining the homemade through a very fine sieve). Its syrupy consistency and mahogany color were flawless, and it delivered a deep, rich meaty flavor.

My only complaint was that several of the "chef-tasters" I enlisted detected a slightly flat, over-reduced flavor typical of some bases. But the stuff isn't really meant to be used alone as a sauce, so I don't consider this to be a problem. The slight flatness was easily masked by pairing the sauce base with as-

sertive seasonings such as wine reductions, acid ingredients, or vivid spices. A colleague worked wonders with a fruity, heady red wine and port reduction; a white wine and shallot reduction, however, was too delicate to stand up to the forceful Demi-Glace Gold.

I decided to test Demi-Glace Gold on some classic French sauces. A *sauce Robert*, using a good dose of Dijon mustard, was delicious, as was a wild mushroom sauce and a simple but spicy *sauce au poivre* with lots of cracked black pepper. I also had fantastic success using the diluted product for deglazing when making a quick pan sauce and as a braising liquid to create deeper flavors. Demi-Glace Gold can also be used to enrich the flavor of grains—rice, barley, kasha—by adding a teaspoon per cup of grain to the water during cooking.

As a soup base, two ounces made a quart of richly flavored broth; I added fresh vegetables and grains, which really came to life against a deep background of a well-made stock. But because there's a little flour in it, Demi-Glace Gold is somewhat cloudy with a starchy sediment, so it doesn't lend itself to delicate preparations.

I worked with two sizes of Demi-Glace Gold—a 1½-ounce "puck" and an 8-ounce jar. The puck produces enough demi-glace to make sauce for four to six servings. It's also available in food-service quantities of 10- and 50-pound buckets.

The real beauty of this product is the fact that it isn't just for classic sauce-making. I enjoyed it the most when I

used it for dishes like an impromptu pan sauce or a rice pilaf—everyday dishes that I'd never bother to make veal stock for, but that taste so much better with it.

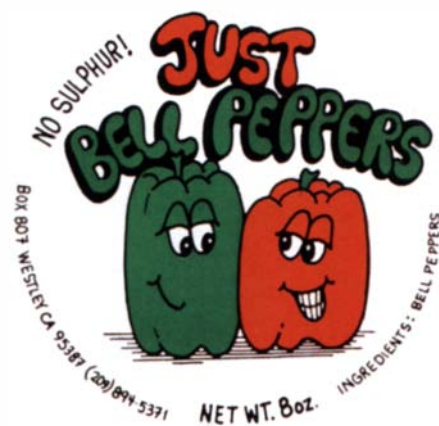
Demi-Glace Gold will soon be available in gourmet stores nationwide. To find the retailer nearest you, or to order, contact More Than Gourmet, 115 W. Bartges St., Akron, OH 44311; 800/860-9392.

—Molly Stevens, chef/instructor, New England Culinary Institute, Essex, Vermont

Just Bell Peppers

Karen and Bill Cox produce very fine dried tomatoes called Just Tomatoes. Now they're offering Just Bell Peppers, dried red and green bell pepper strips.

The Coxes grow most of the vegetables they dry. Any others they need come from farms near their home in California's Central Valley. They use only hand-picked produce and everything is rushed to their drying facility to ensure the freshest flavor. Their homemade dehydrator preserves without salt, sulfur, or other preservatives. Bill and Karen like to say their products are "the next step from fresh."



Just Bell Peppers comes in 1- and 8-ounce packages, containing a mix of red and green peppers. We find the green bitter and would have preferred a choice rather than a mix. Dehydrated raw, with the peel intact, the skins are tough and unpleasantly chewy, even when reconstituted. But the intense bell-pepper flavor is quite good.

To reconstitute the peppers, cover with hot water or stock and let stand until tender, about 45 minutes. One ounce dried yields about four ounces plump peppers. The strained liquid makes a terrific

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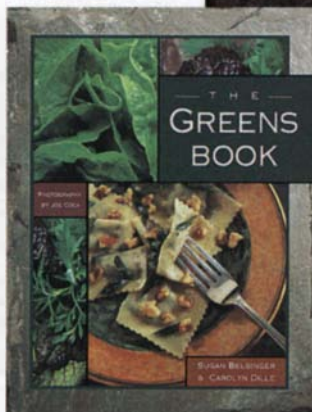
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base for soups and stews. We particularly like it in chili.

You don't always have to reconstitute the peppers: if there's enough moisture in the dish, you can add them straight from the bag. They'll taste better, too, when plumped with flavorful cooking juices instead of water.

We added the peppers to a black-bean salad with just a bit more dressing than usual. After 20 minutes, the peppers were plump and full of tangy vinaigrette. We like to sauté Just Bell Peppers with sliced onions. The peppers soak up the juices let off by the onions. Flavored with cumin and fresh coriander, it's delicious! The dried peppers are too tough to chop, but they can be frozen briefly (about 15 minutes) and crumbled onto pizzas, into omelets, or added to cheese sandwiches before grilling.

Look for Just Bell Peppers in specialty shops, or call 800/537-1985 for ordering information.

—Dona and Stuart Tarbour, chef/owners of Kitchen Market and The Bright Food Shop, New York City

Building a Better Cookbook Holder

Any cookbook holder is a better alternative to setting a prized recipe collection in a puddle on the counter and holding the page down with a can of soup. Still, most make page-turning a two-handed task, requiring you to remove the book, turn the page, and replace the book in the holder while you try not to smear cookie dough across the pages. Also, the awkward shape of most book holders makes them difficult to store.



Clear Solutions of West Brattleboro, Vermont, has come up with a beautifully simple answer to the book-holder problem.

Instead of a single piece of formed plastic, Clear Solutions uses a hinge to attach a sheet of Plexiglas to a hardwood base. The hinge allows you to flip down the Plexiglas and turn pages with one hand while stirring a sauce with the other. It also lets the holder fold flat for easy storage. The grooved wooden base holds a separate back support that can be adjusted to different thicknesses, so you can hold open this issue of *Fine Cooking* as easily as your copy of *Larousse Gastronomique*. The one drawback is that the Plexiglas front isn't glareproof, so recipes can be difficult to read. I know one smart cook who solved that problem by having her holder fitted with a piece of nonglare glass.

Clear Solutions guarantees the holder against breakage for one year. It costs about \$25 at cookware stores nationwide. For information about where to find one in your area, call 800/257-4550.

—Jan Newberry, *Fine Cooking* ♦

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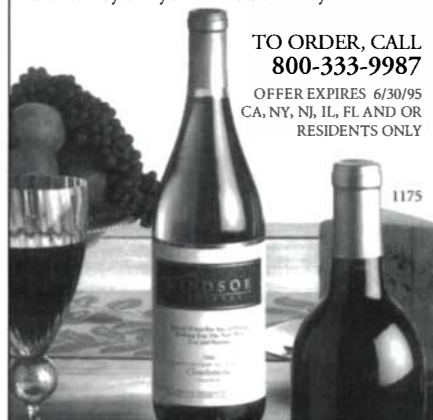
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Do you have a clever way to peel vegetables, line a cake pan, or keep herbs tasting fresh? Share your shortcuts and tricks with fellow readers by writing to *Tips, Fine Cooking*, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506. We pay for tips we publish.

Peeling Kiwis

Nothing mars the appearance of sliced kiwis more than the evidence of paring knife ridges and edges. I have found a simpler and less frustrating method using

an ordinary teaspoon. To start, cut the kiwi in half. In one of the halves, insert the tip of the shallow spoon between the skin and the flesh (see top illustration). Turn the kiwi while pushing the spoon gently farther in until you hit the end. Rotate the kiwi completely at least once to make sure that all of the skin, except for a small spot at the end, is separated. Scoop out the emerald flesh, or remove the skin by peeling it back like a sock. The skin doubles as a convenient handle to hold the fruit for slicing (see bottom illustration). Repeat with the other half.

—Jürgen Richter,
Mississauga, ON

Cross-Referencing Recipes

In my recipe file, I keep cards for many unusual or infrequently used ingredients that might go to waste because I only need a small quantity for a recipe—buttermilk, for example. On that card, I've listed several foods with buttermilk in it, like pancakes, biscuits, Aunt Helen's Ranch Dressing, etc. The card reminds me what other recipes I use that call for that ingredient. This prompts me to make one of those recipes so I can use up the remaining quantity.

—Mary Sullivan,
Concord, CA

Versatile Zip-Top Bags

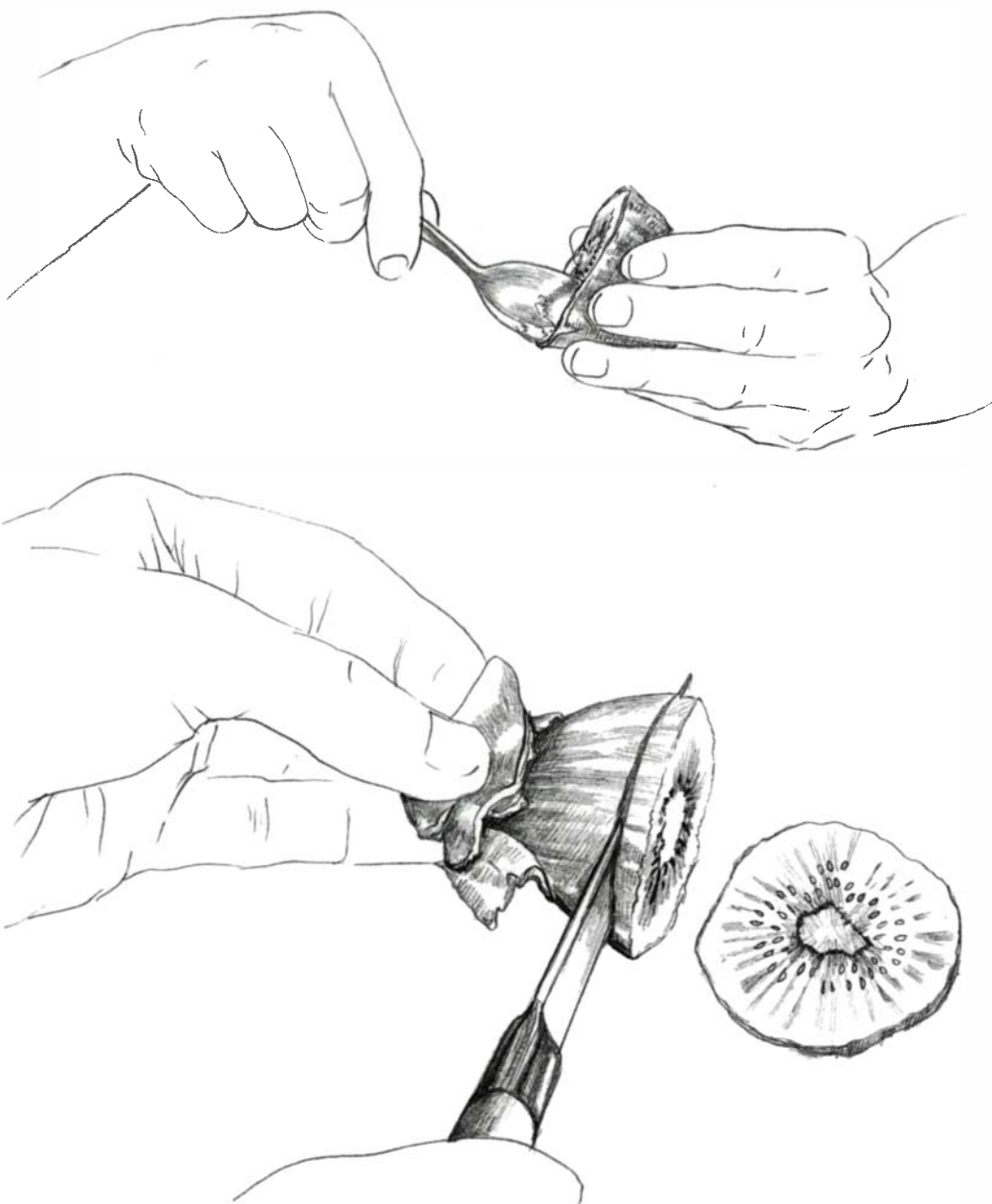
The most valuable tool in my kitchen, without doubt, is a freezer bag with a zip top. These heavy-duty bags are good for more than just storing foods—and they're microwave-safe.

Lightly coat the inside of a gallon-size freezer bag with vegetable spray and let yeast dough rise in it. Seal the bag and simply put the dough in a warm place in your kitchen. After the dough has doubled, punch it down and shape it as the recipe suggests. There's no clean-up of messy greased bowls.

Put chopped chocolate in a bag, seal it shut, and put it in hot water for about five minutes. Remove from the water, dry the bag, and knead it with your hands for about a minute. When the chocolate is smooth and creamy, snip a small hole in the corner of the bag and squeeze the chocolate onto cakes, pastries, or bar cookies to decorate. You can also pipe star shapes, scroll designs, or even sentiments such as "Congratulations" or "Happy Birthday" on kitchen parchment. When the chocolate hardens, gently peel off the designs and use them for decoration.

When filling mini-muffin cups or madeleine tins, put the batter in a gallon-size bag, seal, and snip a $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch opening from one corner of the bag. Then simply pipe the batter into the prepared tins. There are no messy drips or batter spills that need to be wiped away before baking.

Also, you can use the gallon-size freezer bags to steam green beans and



asparagus in the microwave. Prep the vegetables as described in your recipe. Rinse them with cold running water and seal the vegetables, with water still clinging to them, in the bag. Put the bag in the microwave. For 1 to 1½ pounds of crisp tender green beans or asparagus, I usually microwave at 100% power for five to six minutes. Again, there's no mess, the kitchen stays cool, and the stovetop is free for other chores.

—Ray L. Overton III,
The Georgia Lifestyles
Learning Center,
Alpharetta, GA

Smooth Pie Shells

To keep a pie shell from bubbling up when you bake it empty, or "blind," it's a good idea to put in a liner of aluminum foil and weigh it down. Instead of using beans, though, try filling it with pennies from the penny jar. Makes cents?

—John G. Sisson,
New York, NY



Testing Artichokes

When boiling whole artichokes, check for doneness by pulling on the top of an interior leaf. If the leaf comes free under

the artichoke's weight, then it's done. If it needs more coercion to break loose, then it needs more cooking.

—Diane Chesterton,
Kansas City, MO

Microwave Proofing

The microwave is a great place to let bread dough rise. Heat a small bowl of water in the microwave and leave it there. Put the bowl of bread dough in the oven and close the door. The hot water creates warmth and moisture. If the dough is a little dry, leave it uncovered; if its texture is perfect, cover it.

—Theresa Overfield,
Salt Lake City, UT

Chinese "Balsamic" Vinegar

I have found that Chinese black vinegar, also called Chekiang vinegar, is a good substitute for balsamic vinegar. Made from fermented rice, this vinegar is dark

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and richly flavored like balsamic, but slightly less sweet. I prefer Narcissus brand made in Yongchun, in the Chekiang province, but it's often difficult to find. I usually buy Gold-Plum brand black vinegar, which in my area costs only \$1.29 for a 21-ounce bottle.

—Bill Moran,
San Diego, TX

No-Stick Measuring

When a recipe calls for both solid shortening and whole eggs or egg whites, use the eggs to keep the shortening from sticking to the measuring cup. Break the eggs into a measuring cup, swish them around to coat the inside of the cup, and then transfer them to the mixing bowl or to another container. Measure the shortening as usual in the coated cup. Turn the cup over and all the shortening will easily slide out.

—Kathryn H. Adams,
Birmingham, AL

Anchoring Kitchen Parchment

Call me a control freak, but I like to be in complete control of the baking parchment when I do my baking. There's nothing worse than trying to work with parchment that slides all over the baking sheet because it doesn't quite fit the pan. Whenever I make biscotti, cookies, or *pâte à choux* (cream puffs), I use a little of the dough or batter to glue the corners of the paper to my baking sheet. After baking, the paper comes off easily, and clean up is a breeze. Isn't that the reason they made baking parchment?

—Eric Hoey,
San Pedro, CA

Drying Mushrooms

Instead of buying expensive wild mushrooms in the winter, try drying your own while they're in season. With a needle and thread, string the mushrooms through their stems and hang them up-

side down in a warm and dry room. They'll dry out in 3 to 7 days. It's a good idea to stick the dried mushrooms in the freezer for a day or so to kill any insects that may still be on them.

—Douglas Kreidler,
Olympic Valley, CA

Cleaning the Blade

Here's how to get the last sticky remnants off a food processor blade without endangering your fingers or fussing with a rubber scraper. First empty the contents of the work bowl, but don't worry about getting it all. Reassemble the processor and pulse the blade several times. The remainder of the ingredients will now be up against the side of the work bowl—not on the blade—so you won't have to scrape the blade. Take out the blade to make it easy to scrape down the sides of the work bowl.

—Georgene Hawkins-Kunz,
Fircrest, WA

(Continued on p. 27)

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Washing Lettuce

Here's a quick way to wash the dirt out of "open-ended lettuce," such as red leaf, romaine, and Bibb. Cut a V-shaped wedge from the stem end of the lettuce and

remove the wedge. Holding the bottom of the lettuce firmly, run cool water into the cut area that's now exposed at the base of the lettuce. The water will flow down through the layers of leaves, and will gently push the dirt from bottom to top. Because you've cut away the root, the lettuce leaves can be peeled away easily. Be sure to check for any stubborn dirt that might have clung to the ribs before drying the lettuce.

—Walter J. Morrison III,
Buffalo, NY

Sweating Peppers

To easily peel bell peppers, char the skins and then instead of putting them in a plastic bag to sweat, put them in a bowl and cover immediately with plastic wrap. Let the peppers steam for 10 to 15 minutes. Take them out—the skins should slide right off. Pour the pepper juices that remain in the bowl into whatever you're cooking.

—Betsy P. Race,
Euclid, OH

Halt the Tears

After crying my way through all the tricks in the book for cutting onions, my husband suggested I try goggles. I know I look silly in the kitchen with swim goggles on, but I wear them from the first slice of onion to the last and never shed a tear.

—Gretchen Allison, chef,
Duck Soup Inn,
Friday Harbor, WA

No-Grit Beet Juice

After boiling unpeeled beets, you're left with a delightfully colored, flavorful liquid, which unfortunately contains quite a bit of sand. To thoroughly eliminate this grit, put a paper coffee filter in a strainer and pour the liquid through. If you don't have an immediate need for the liquid, freeze it and use it later in your stockpot in place of water. This method also works for the water used to rehydrate dried mushrooms.

—Laile A. Giansetto,
Berkeley, CA ♦

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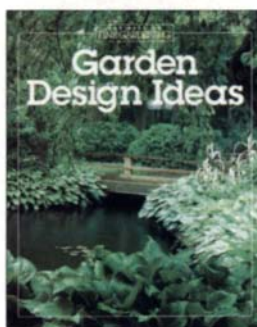
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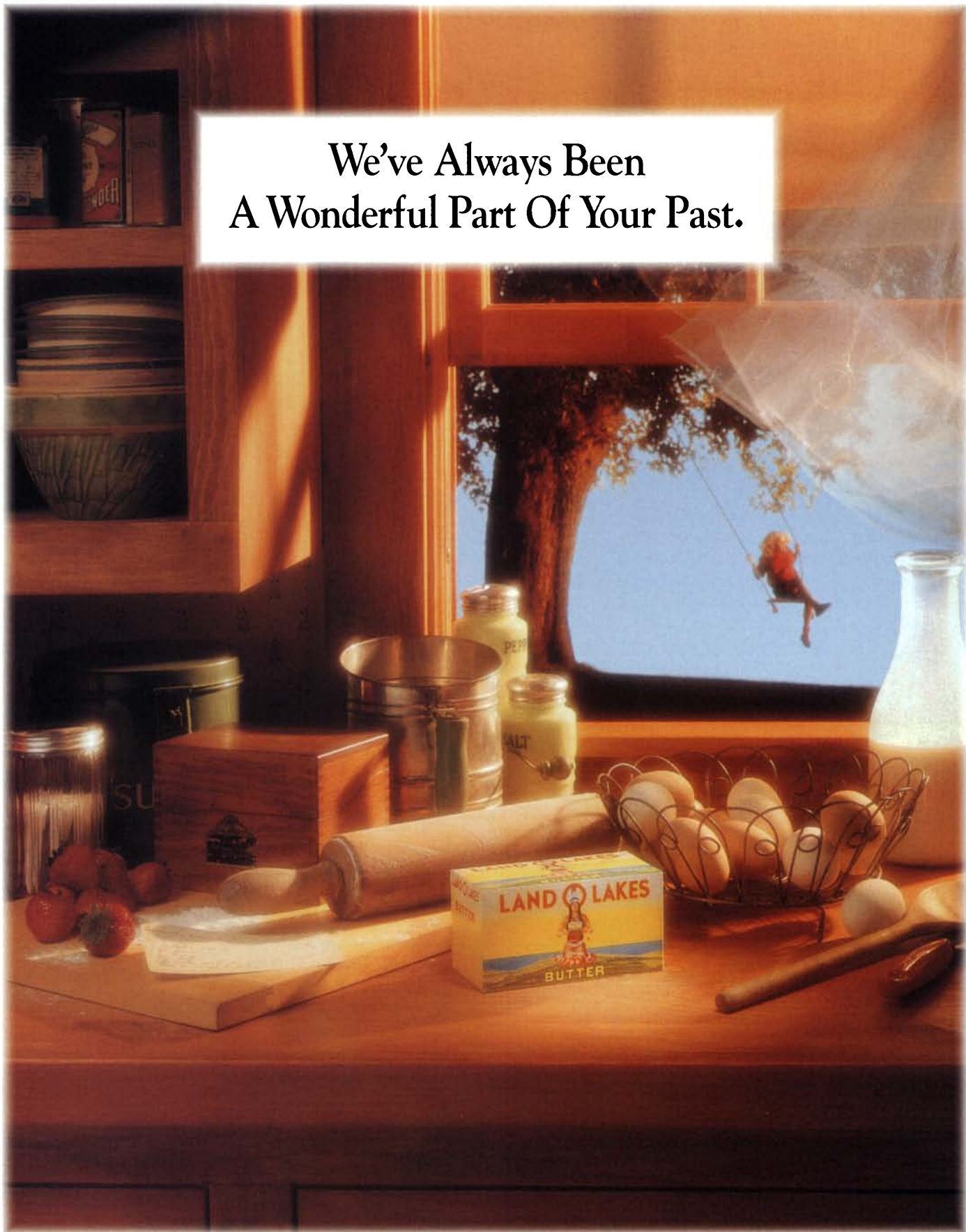
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Big Flavor from a Small Bird

Cornish game hens are
delicious, versatile, and
right for any seasonal menu

BY LUCIA WATSON

*Simply delicious.
Cornish game hen
roasted with seasonal
vegetables and served
with a lemony sauce
makes an easy and
appealing main course
for a spring menu.*



At my restaurant, Lucia's, I change the menu weekly, adapting to the weather and to whatever catches my eye at the farmers' market in Minneapolis. Rock Cornish game hens are perfect for my style of seasonal cooking, since each bird makes a plentiful serving for one and tastes delicious with heaps of whatever bright, fresh vegetables we have on hand.

A SPRING MENU

In this spring menu, I treat the game hens with a very light hand, cooking them simply with lots of fresh herbs, some early root vegetables, and serving them with a light lemony sauce that's made right in the pan as I roast. My roasting technique is a little different from the way you'd roast a chicken. I cook the birds covered for part of the time, in a very deep sauté pan or a Dutch oven. I layer the bottom of the pan with the wing tips, vegetables, and seasonings, and then I arrange the birds (breast side down) on top. I pour over some chicken stock and lemon juice, cover the pan, and put them in the oven for about twenty minutes. I finish cooking them uncovered so they can turn golden and the liquid in the pan can reduce slightly.

This dish is simple enough to cook for a spur of the moment dinner, but I think it's so pretty and flavorful that it feels special enough for a dinner party. I'd begin the meal with a salad; since the game hen is light, the salad can have richer components, like toasted goat cheese croutons. The game hen recipe itself contains all the side dishes you'll need, so all that's left is a dessert. I've chosen a moist poppy seed cake that's great to bake ahead. I serve slices of the cake with sweet-tart lemon curd that I mellow a little by folding in whipped cream.

GAME HEN BASICS

Rock Cornish game hens are the result of cross-breeding Cornish gamecocks and Plymouth Rock hens; don't confuse them with poussins, which are young chickens. Each plump bird is a generous single serving, making game hens ideal for households of one or two people. Weighing about a pound, Cornish game hens roast in an hour, and they cook even more quickly if split and grilled or broiled.

Cornish game hens are sold fresh or frozen. Frozen hens are more common, but I prefer fresh hens. They're more tender, have a cleaner flavor, and tend to become crispier when roasted. If you can find them, fresh ones cost a bit more, but they're worth the extra expense.

As with all poultry, you should use good handling techniques to minimize any risk of salmonella. I suggest thawing frozen hens in the refrigerator overnight. You can also safely thaw them in a microwave set on low at about six minutes per pound, or in a cold water bath no longer than two hours, changing the water every thirty minutes. Never let a Cornish game hen thaw, or sit, at room temperature, and don't try to speed up thawing by running the bird under hot water. Fresh or thawed hens will keep up to three days in the refrigerator; cooked meat will keep up to two days.

BONING IS EASY

Removing the backbone of a Cornish hen is a trick well worth mastering. A boned hen lies flat, exposing more of the bird to the heat source and allowing the natural juices and any marinade to permeate the hen rather than running off. Boned birds also are easily divided in half for serving. An under-the-skin stuffing plumps up a boned bird for an appealing presentation.

To bone a Cornish hen (or any bird, really), begin by trimming the wings with a sharp knife or poultry shears. I do this whether I'm boning the game hen or using it whole, cutting the wings at the second joint (see bottom photo at right). Add the trimmings to the roasting pan, or save them for stock; they're a great source of flavor.

Next, prop up the game hen so it's vertical, with its back toward you (see top photo on p. 33). With a sharp knife, cut through the skin and flesh along the entire length of one side of the spine. Flip the bird around and repeat on the other

side of the spine. Remove the backbone. (This can also be added to the roasting pan or saved for stock.) Use the tip of the knife to remove the little wishbone at the neck end, and spread open the bird with the inside facing you. Find the whitish triangle of cartilage at the tip of the breastbone and nick it with the knife (see middle photo on p. 33). Now pick up the bird and bend it backward along the breastbone to crack it. Slide the tip of the knife or your finger under each side of the breastbone to loosen it, and then yank it out. Leave the ribs in place.

THE WELL-DRESSED HEN

Plump Cornish hens take well to almost any dressing or stuffing. You can use your favorite bread or cornbread stuffing to fill the cavity, or try making a wonderful stuffing from odd pieces of homemade bread, leftover rice pilaf, or new potatoes. Toss the starch you choose with chopped mushrooms and a root



Preparing Cornish game hens couldn't be easier. Scatter the vegetables and herbs in the bottom of a deep sauté pan, arrange the seasoned hens (breast side down) on the vegetables, add a little stock and lemon juice to the pan, and slide it into the oven.



To trim the wings, find the joint and slice right through. Extending the wing will help you see the right place to cut. Save the wing tips and add them to the roasting pan for more flavor.

MENU

*Tossed Greens with
Baked Goat Cheese Croutons
& Shallot Vinaigrette*



*Cornish Game Hens
Roasted with Spring Vegetables*



*Poppy Seed Cake with
Lemon Curd*

MAKING IT EASY

No need to rush with this menu—lots can be prepared ahead, and the last-minute tasks are “low-stress.”

Two days ahead:

- ◆ Soak the poppy seeds for the cake.

One day ahead:

- ◆ Bake the cake and make the lemon curd base.

In the afternoon:

- ◆ Wash the greens.
- ◆ Make the vinaigrette.
- ◆ Marinate the goat cheese.
- ◆ Prepare the vegetables.
- ◆ Trim and season the Cornish hens.
- As the evening begins:**
- ◆ Roast the Cornish hens and make the sauce.
- ◆ Bake the goat cheese croutons and assemble the salad.
- ◆ Whip the cream and fold it into the lemon curd.



Warm goat cheese on croutons gives this spring salad special appeal. Make some extra shallot vinaigrette to use later.



Poppy seeds look dramatic and taste delicious in this cake. A big spoonful of creamy lemon curd is the sharp-but-sweet accent.

vegetable sautéed in butter or olive oil. You'll need a little less than a cup of stuffing for each bird.

I find an "under-the-skin" stuffing more interesting than a stuffing in the cavity. The flavoring in the stuffing really permeates the meat, and with this method you can stuff boned and split birds that you plan to grill (see boning instructions on p. 31). The stuffing can be as simple as butter and fresh herbs or more complex, like the cheese, herb, and prosciutto stuffing I suggest for a winter game-hen dish (see recipe p. 35).

To prepare a game hen for an under-the-skin stuffing, begin at the top of the breast, and gently lift and pull the skin away from the flesh of the bird. Be very careful and very patient; game hen skin is delicate. Once you've separated the skin from the meat, use your fingers to gently force the stuffing between the meat and skin, pushing it back and around the breast, and even down the thighs and legs, as you go. Try to keep the layer of stuffing as even as possible for a better shape and even cooking. Don't force too much under the skin, or fill the cavity with too much if you're using that method, since stuffing expands as it cooks.

TOSSED GREENS WITH BAKED GOAT CHEESE CROUTONS & SHALLOT VINAIGRETTE

This salad is simple but the flavors work beautifully together. Serves four.

4 oz. soft goat cheese
½ cup good-quality olive oil
1 clove garlic, crushed
1 Tbs. chopped fresh mixed herbs (such as basil, tarragon, thyme, parsley)
4 slices French bread, about ¾ in. thick
About 6 cups mixed salad greens

FOR THE SHALLOT VINAIGRETTE:

2 medium shallots, sliced
¼ cup good-quality white-wine vinegar
1 tsp. Dijon mustard
⅓ cup plus 1 Tbs. good-quality olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Marinate the goat cheese in the oil, garlic, and herbs at least 1 hour, longer if you have time.

At least 2 hours before serving, combine the shallots and vinegar in a medium bowl and let sit at room temperature for about 2 hours. Whisk in the mustard, and then whisk in the oil in a slow, steady stream. Season with salt and pepper.

Just before serving, heat the oven to 450°. Brush some of the seasoned oil from the cheese onto both sides of the bread slices and toast for a few minutes until slightly crispy. Spread the goat cheese evenly on one side of the toasted croutons and "blast" them in the hot oven for 1 to 2 min., until the cheese is hot but not melted or gooey.

Toss the greens with a few spoonfuls of the vinaigrette (store the rest covered in the refrigerator up to three days), divide among four plates, and garnish with a crouton.

CORNISH GAME HENS ROASTED WITH SPRING VEGETABLES

Use whatever vegetables you like, just make sure to add softer, quicker-cooking ones later. Exact amounts aren't important in this dish, but don't crowd the roasting pan. Use more than one pan if your ingredients are mounded too high. Serves four.



Prop up the bird so you can slice along the backbone (left). Cut along each side with a sharp knife, or use poultry shears.

4 Cornish hens (about 1 lb. each)
4 Tbs. unsalted butter, softened
Several generous sprigs of mixed fresh herbs (thyme, rosemary, parsley, marjoram, savory)
8 garlic cloves, peeled
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1 lb. young carrots, peeled if necessary
1 lb. new potatoes, peeled if necessary and halved if large
½ cup homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock
¼ cup lemon juice
1 lb. fresh asparagus, ends trimmed, peeled if necessary
More butter for sauce (optional)
Shreds of lemon zest and more fresh herbs for decoration

Rinse each game hen, pat dry, and cut off and reserve the wings at the second joint. Gently loosen the skin from the breast meat and smear about 2 tsp. of the soft butter under the skin of each bird. Slide in a few sprigs of herbs. Put a few more sprigs, along with 2 garlic cloves, into each cavity. Rub the rest of the butter on the outside of each bird, and then season inside and out with the salt and pepper. If you like, tie the ends of the legs together for a neater presentation.

Heat the oven to 400°F. In a deep sauté pan or a Dutch oven, toss the reserved wing tips, carrots, potatoes, and any remaining herbs. Arrange the hens, breast side down, on top of the vegetables and bones. They can fit snugly, but they shouldn't be squeezed together. Sprinkle with salt and pepper, pour in the stock and lemon juice. Cover the pan and cook in the hot oven for about 20 min. Remove the lid, turn the birds so they're breast side up, baste them with a little pan juice and continue roasting (uncovered), basting a few more times, until they're golden brown and the juices run clear from their cavities or from their thighs when pricked with a knife. This should take about 45 to 55 min. more. About



The backbone comes away easily, allowing you to open up the bird to remove the breastbone. The backbone can go in the roasting pan or the stockpot for flavor, too.



To remove the breastbone, loosen the cartilage, grasp it firmly, and yank. Now your game hen is "flat," ready for grilling or roasting quickly.



There's a lot of room for stuffing under the skin. The author gently slides her fingers between the skin and meat to create a large pocket, perfect for a prosciutto and cheese stuffing, fresh herbs, or a savory bread stuffing.



Game hen is right for summer when it's grilled and served on cool, crisp greens. A yogurt marinade and a tangy, garlicky Moroccan dressing make the dish delicious.

10 min. before you think the birds will be done, arrange the asparagus over the top of the birds to cook it. If you're not sure about the timing, or if your pan is too full, simply steam the asparagus separately for about 5 min. in salted water.

Remove the birds and vegetables and keep them warm. Strain the pan juices, skim off as much fat as possible, and taste. If they're a little thin, boil them for a few minutes to concentrate the flavor; season with salt and pepper. If the sauce tastes too lemony, whisk in 1 or 2 Tbs. cold butter.

To serve, arrange one hen on each plate and arrange the vegetables around it. Pour over a few spoonfuls of sauce and decorate with shreds of lemon zest and some fresh herbs.

POPPY SEED CAKE WITH LEMON CURD

I use lots of poppy seeds in this cake for a striking look and delicious flavor. *Yields one bundt cake and about 1½ cups creamy lemon curd.*

FOR THE CAKE:

1 cup poppy seeds
¾ cup milk
12 Tbs. unsalted butter
1½ cups sugar
3 eggs
1 tsp. vanilla extract
2 cups unbleached all-purpose flour
2 tsp. baking powder
½ tsp. salt
1 Tbs. grated orange zest

FOR THE LEMON CURD:

Grated zest of 4 lemons
½ cup lemon juice
2 eggs
2 egg yolks
1 cup sugar
6 Tbs. unsalted butter
½ cup heavy cream, chilled
Fresh berries and mint sprigs for decoration



Make a warming autumn meal by roasting game hens with acorn squash and sage. Sprinkle on some toasted pumpkin seeds for a crunchy, nutty finish.

For the cake—Soak the poppy seeds in the milk overnight.

Heat the oven to 375° and generously butter and flour a 9-in. (10-cup) bundt pan. With an electric mixer, cream the butter and sugar in a large bowl. Add the eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add the vanilla and the milk with the poppy seeds. Sift together the flour, baking powder, salt, and orange zest; add this to the butter and sugar mixture, blending well. Pour the batter into the prepared pan and bake until the cake springs back when you press it lightly, 30 to 40 min. Cool on a rack about 10 min., and then take the cake out of the pan and cool completely on the rack.

For the lemon curd—In a stainless-steel bowl, whisk together the lemon zest, juice, eggs, egg yolks, and sugar. Put the bowl over a pot of simmering—not boiling—water to form a double boiler and cook, whisking constantly, until the mixture becomes thick, translucent, and a little “wobbly.” Remove the pan from the heat and strain the mixture into a bowl. Whisk in the butter until completely incorporated. Chill thoroughly.

Just before serving—Whip the cream until it forms soft peaks. Fold a little of the whipped cream into the lemon curd to lighten it, and then gently fold in the rest.

To serve—Slice the cake and top each slice with a generous spoonful of lemon curd. Decorate with fresh berries and a mint sprig, if you like.

Lucia Watson is a native of Minneapolis. She opened her restaurant ten years ago, and even though she's expanded twice, it's still difficult to get a reservation. Lucia was assisted on this article by Beth Dooley, a Minneapolis food writer who is Lucia's co-author of Savoring the Seasons of the Northern Heartland, Knopf Cooks American Series, 1994.



Feature game hens at a special winter meal. Stuffed with Parmesan and prosciutto, a split bird makes an elegant main course.

Cornish game hens are delicious any time of year

Cornish game hens form easy partnerships with many ingredients, making them good candidates for a menu no matter what the season. Roast them whole with sage, acorn squash, and a sprinkling of toasted pumpkin seeds for a warming autumn meal. For winter, dress up the birds by boning them and stuffing them under the skin with a thin slice of prosciutto and a savory ricotta and Parmesan filling. Cornish hens are great for grilling, too, so build a summer menu around birds that are marinated in spiced yogurt, grilled, and served on a bed of mixed greens with a tangy cilantro dressing.

GRILLED GAME HEN SALAD FOR SUMMER

Serves four.

2 Cornish hens (about 1 lb. each)
About 6 cups mixed salad greens

FOR THE MARINADE:

1 cup plain yogurt
1½ tsp. ground cumin
Grated zest and juice of ½ lemon
1½ tsp. chopped cilantro
1½ tsp. chopped fresh parsley
¼ tsp. cayenne
½ tsp. paprika
Salt to taste

Rinse the hens and pat them dry. Bone and flatten them (see instructions on p. 31). Mix together the marinade ingredients and rub all over the hens, including under

the skin. Refrigerate the hens in the marinade, covered, overnight.

Prepare a charcoal or gas grill and heat to medium. Remove the hens from the marinade and let some of the excess drip off. Place each hen, skin side down, on the grill and cook for 1 to 2 min.; repeat on the other side. Cover the grill and cook the hens about 15 min. on each side. Grill temperatures vary, so check for doneness carefully. The hens are done when the thigh juices run clear when pricked with a fork.

Let the hens rest for a few minutes until they're cool enough to handle. Cut into quarters, or with a paring knife and your fingers, remove all the meat. You can serve the salad while the meat is still warm, or you can chill it first.

To serve, make a mound of greens on each plate, arrange the grilled meat on top and drizzle with your favorite vinaigrette or with *charmoula* (see recipe below).

CHARMOULA

Yields about 1¼ cups.

½ cup olive oil
¼ cup fresh lemon juice
¼ cup chopped parsley
¼ cup chopped cilantro
2 cloves garlic, minced fine
1½ tsp. paprika
1 tsp. ground cumin
¼ tsp. cayenne
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Whisk all ingredients together in a mixing bowl. Taste and adjust seasoning. Any leftover *charmoula* can be stored in the refrigerator for up to three days.

GAME HENS WITH SQUASH & SAGE FOR AUTUMN

Serves four.

4 Cornish hens (about 1 lb. each)
1 tsp. dried sage
4 Tbs. unsalted butter, softened
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
8 cloves garlic, peeled
12 sprigs fresh sage (or 1 Tbs. dried)
1 Tbs. oil
2 cups coarsely chopped onion
4 cups peeled, cubed acorn squash
½ cup dry white wine
½ cup homemade or low-salt canned chicken stock
½ cup toasted pumpkin seeds or walnut pieces

Heat the oven to 400°F. Remove any fat from the hen cavities; rinse and pat them dry. Gently loosen the skin from the breast meat and sprinkle about ¼ tsp. dried sage over the breasts. Rub each hen with the butter, season generously with salt and pepper, and put 2 cloves of garlic and 1 sage sprig (or a pinch of dried) in each cavity. Truss the legs if you like.

Heat the oil in a roasting pan. Cook the onion over medium heat until lightly browned, about 8 min. Off the heat, arrange the squash in the pan. Scatter the remaining fresh sage over the vegetables. Add the wine and stock. Arrange the hens, breast side down, on the vegetables and roast. (See roasting directions on p. 33.)

When done, remove the hens and vegetables; keep warm. Strain the pan juices and taste. If thin, boil for a few minutes to concentrate. If you like, swirl in 1 Tbs. butter. Adjust the seasoning. Serve the hens on top of the onions and squash, drizzled with sauce, and garnished with pumpkin seeds or walnuts.

PARMESAN-PROSCIUTTO GAME HENS FOR WINTER

Serves four.

2 Cornish hens (about 1 lb. each)
4 large, thin slices prosciutto or good-quality country ham, cut in half
Oil or butter for cooking
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

FOR THE CHEESE FILLING:

1 small onion, diced fine and sautéed in a little oil
2 Tbs. chopped parsley
1 Tbs. chopped fresh basil leaves
2 Tbs. grated Parmesan cheese
¼ cup fresh breadcrumbs
1 egg yolk
1 egg
¾ cup ricotta cheese
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Mix all the cheese filling ingredients together until well blended.

Rinse the hens and pat them dry. Remove the backbones and flatten them, and then carefully work a half slice of prosciutto under the skin of each side of each bird (see photos on p. 33).

With a spoon or a pastry bag, spread some cheese filling on top of the ham, working it down evenly toward the thigh. Press the edge of the skin to close.

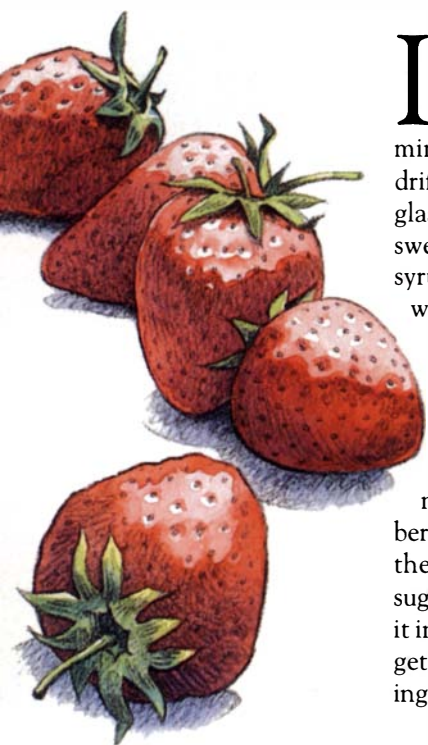
Heat the oven to 400°. Rub a little butter or oil on the top of each bird, season with salt and pepper, and arrange on a shallow baking sheet. Roast until the juices from the thigh run clear, about 45 min. Let rest a few minutes, and then cut each hen in half through the breast.

Serve half a hen per person with a wintery accompaniment, such as spätzle or puréed winter squash. ♦

May: Time to Start a Rumpot

The summer's best berries, plus rum and sugar, make a luscious wintertime dessert

BY MARLENE PARRISH



I had never heard of rumpot until a German friend of mine served it many years ago. She spooned a drift of softly whipped cream into a stemmed glass and topped it with a ladleful of dark, sweet preserved summer berries in a heady syrup. Accompanied by dark-roast coffee, it was irresistible.

My version of rumpot consists of whole berries and cherries preserved in a rum and sugar syrup. The sugar and alcohol preserve the berries while adding a flavor of their own. There's no set recipe, but the technique must be consistent. Select only perfect berries as they come into season. Weigh them, put them in a crock or a jar, add an equal portion of sugar, douse with rum, cover the container, and set it in a cool, dark place to work its magic. When you get the next lot of berries, repeat the process, adding everything to the same crock.

EASY AND SWEET

For the container, you'll need a two- to four-quart crock, such as a bean pot or a heavy, wide-mouth jar. If you want to be absolutely authentic, check out flea markets or country stores for a ceramic German crock labeled *rumpopf*. Glass is less traditional, but it works just fine. Since the pot must be kept covered, it's best to use a container with a tight-fitting lid, but you can always cover the pot with foil or plastic wrap.

Since fruit and sugar are added in equal weights, you'll also need a scale.

Anything from a handful to a whole basket of berries can be added at any time. There are no rules for amounts, but a good proportion might be a quart of strawberries, a quart of raspberries, two cups of cherries, a cup of blueberries, and two cups of blackberries. The fruit will shrink somewhat during steeping as the sugar solution pulls water from the fruit by osmosis.

Apples, peaches, plums, citrus fruits, and pineapple are often added to rumpots. They're delicious, but because they must be peeled and chopped, they tend to change the character of the mixture as they steep. And because they let off so much of their juice, they also cloud the syrup. Whether you use light or dark rum is a personal preference. I've used all light, all dark, and a mixture of both.

HOW TO BEGIN

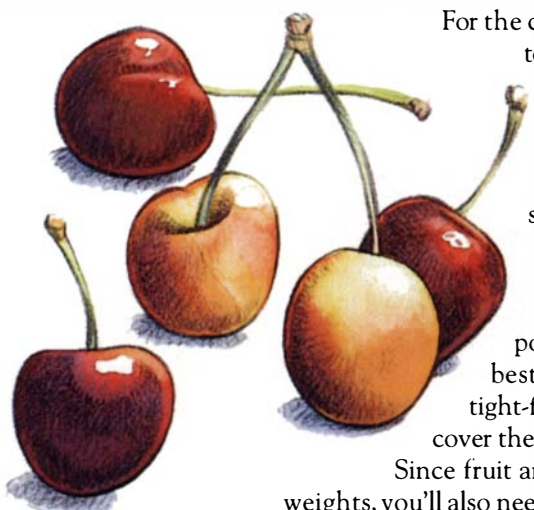
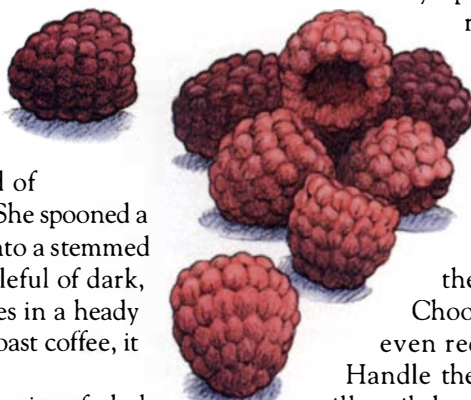
Start your rumpot as soon as the summer fruit comes into market, beginning with the first strawberries of the season.

Choose unblemished berries with an even red color and a heady perfume.

Handle the berries gently—bruised fruit will spoil the clarity of the syrup as it steeps and spoil the rumpot. Give your berries a light rinse and then let them dry. Remove the hulls and weigh the strawberries before putting the fruit in the pot. Scatter an equal weight of sugar over the fruit and pour on enough rum to cover the sugar. Don't shake or stir.

There is no exact measurement for the amount of rum; add just enough to cover the fruit. To keep the fruit completely submerged, choose a plate just a little smaller than the circumference of the container and set it on top of the berries. You want to be sure that the fruit is completely immersed in the rum to prevent it from being exposed to air and spoiling. Put a tight-fitting lid on the pot if you have one; otherwise, cover it with aluminum foil or plastic wrap. If the pot isn't tightly covered, the rum will evaporate. (If that happens, simply add more rum.) A fruit cellar is the traditional spot for storing a rumpot. Keep yours in any cool, dark place.

Add cherries next when they come into season in early July. Red Bing cherries and white Rainiers are both good candidates; save sour cherries for pies. Rinse and dry the fruit, remove the stems, and leave the pits intact. Check the pot for any undissolved sugar before adding more fruit. Use a chopstick or a rubber spatula to soften any lumps you may see, but be gentle—overstirring can damage the fruit and make the syrup cloudy. Add the





cherries, an equal weight of sugar, cover with rum, replace the plate to submerge the fruit, reseal the pot, and return it to a cool, dark place.

Add black and red raspberries as they come into season. Be sure the raspberries are plump and juicy; avoid any that are dry, seedy, or show signs of mold. By now the sugar and rum should have married into a syrup. If, when you add a new batch of berries and sugar, they're covered with syrup and well below the surface, don't bother adding more rum. The point is to be sure that the fruit is submerged, not drowned. Too much rum makes the syrup weak.

Next add blueberries, but not too many, because they can get stiff and rubbery as they steep. Since blueberries are so small and easy to pick over, it's tempting to add a whole basket. Resist the urge or you'll end up with an unbalanced ratio of fruit.

Blackberries ripen in August and are usually my last addition to the rumpot. Other parts of the country have an abundance of native berries that are good rumpot candidates, too. Use whatever is plentiful and luscious in your area. Follow the same procedure with the sugar and rum, stirring gently to distribute any undissolved sugar before adding the fruit.

By summer's end you will have the bounty of half a farm field on the shelf. Think about serving the rumpot in late fall, long after local fresh fruit has become a fond memory. At our house, we open the crock after Thanksgiving dinner, although you could begin sampling as early as the end of October.

A rumpot is fruity and delicious, but remember that the syrup is still an alcoholic beverage. Its alcohol content is closer to that of a liqueur than of rum, however, because the sugar draws the juice out of the berries and dilutes the rum.

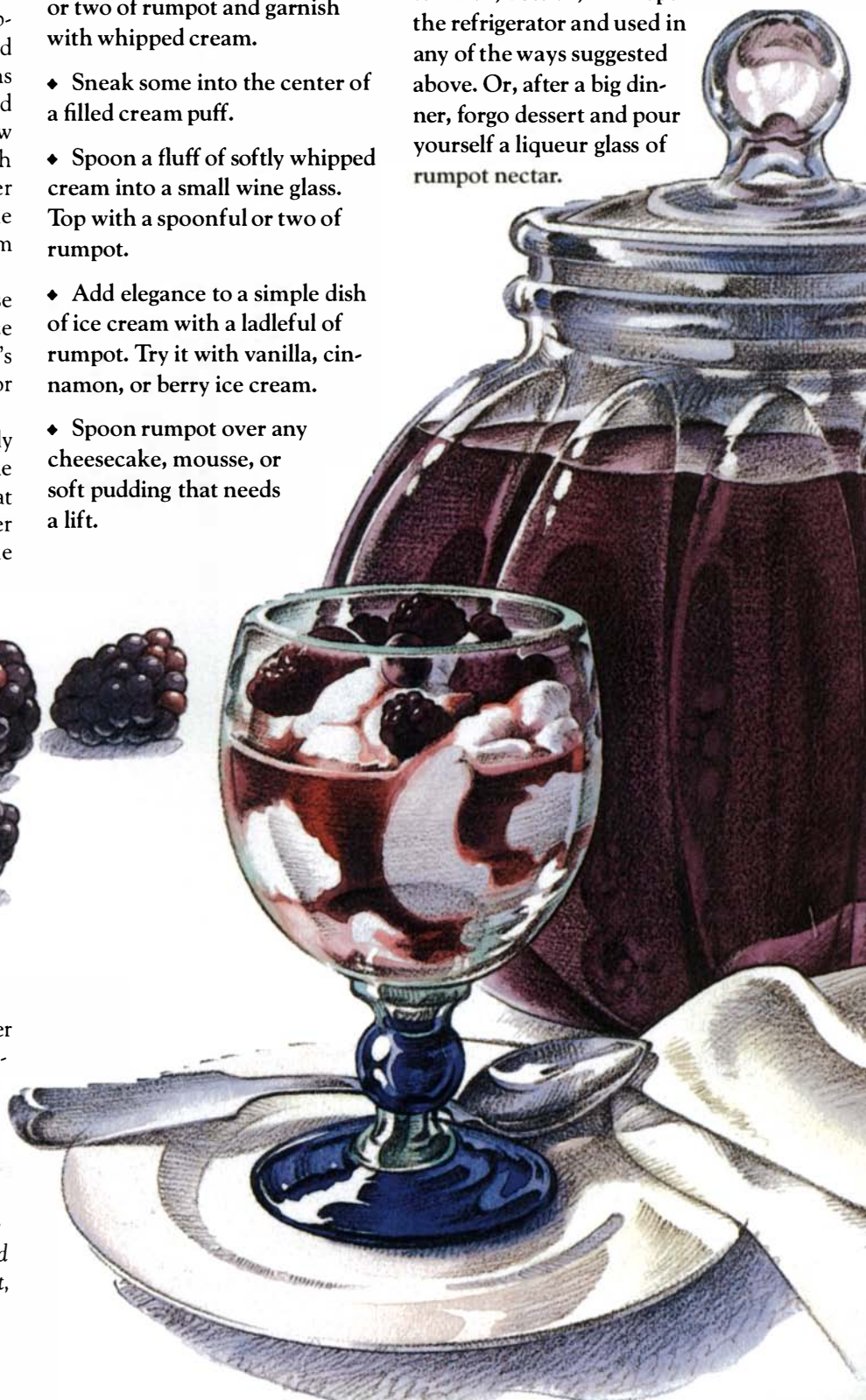
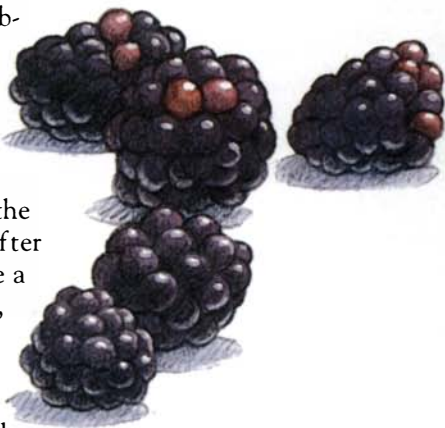
Marlene Parrish, a former food editor and restaurant reviewer for Pittsburgh Magazine, is now a freelance food and travel writer. A lifelong foodie, she has owned and operated a cooking school, worked as a food stylist, and cowritten five cookbooks. ♦

Rumpot for dessert

Rumpot has an affinity for plain-Jane desserts, and its texture is greatly enhanced by the silkiness of whipped toppings. Here are some ways to serve it:

- ♦ Top a slice of pound cake or angel food cake with a spoonful or two of rumpot and garnish with whipped cream.
- ♦ Sneak some into the center of a filled cream puff.
- ♦ Spoon a fluff of softly whipped cream into a small wine glass. Top with a spoonful or two of rumpot.
- ♦ Add elegance to a simple dish of ice cream with a ladleful of rumpot. Try it with vanilla, cinnamon, or berry ice cream.
- ♦ Spoon rumpot over any cheesecake, mousse, or soft pudding that needs a lift.

Is there too much liquid in your rumpot? Don't worry about it. Trying to end up with equal amounts of berries and syrup is like trying to saw a four-legged table: it never comes out just right. Any leftover syrup can be strained, bottled, and kept in the refrigerator and used in any of the ways suggested above. Or, after a big dinner, forgo dessert and pour yourself a liqueur glass of rumpot nectar.



Roasting Rack of Lamb

Cooked whole, the rack is more than the sum of its chops

BY MOLLY STEVENS

There is something undeniably elegant and indulgent about rack of lamb. With its rich flavor, tender texture, and visual appeal, this majestic cut is often reserved for special occasions or intimate dinners for two. While most lamb is eaten in restaurants, I've found that preparing rack of lamb at home is surprisingly easy and always impressive. Although the rack is simply eight lamb chops left as one roast, it is altogether more splendid than serving individual chops. Roasted whole, the meat remains juicier and the presentation is more dramatic, while the preparation itself very straightforward.

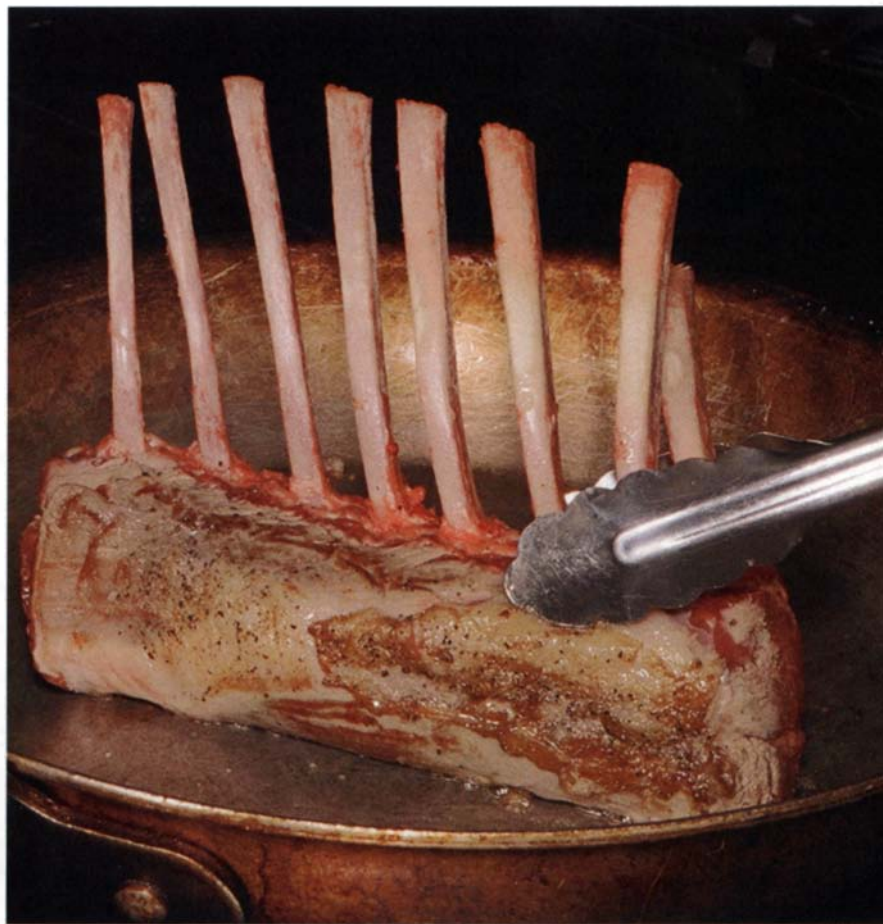
BUYING A RACK OF LAMB

Lamb was once considered a seasonal specialty, but this is no longer true. Modern farming now ensures high-quality lamb year-round. The lamb available in markets today comes from animals ranging in age from four to nine months. Anything older is classified as mutton and is a different product altogether. Meat from the smallest livestock, known as "baby" lamb (also called "hothouse" lamb), is still easiest to locate in the spring when lamb sales are the highest. Most butchers don't regularly offer racks (only chops), but they will gladly order one for you if you call ahead.

What's included in the rack? The "rack" refers to the section of meat extending from the shoulder to the loin. The rack usually consists of eight rib chops, but some butchers will offer seven or nine ribs to a rack. Expect a trimmed rack, including bone, to weigh between one and a quarter and one and a half pounds. Each chop offers around two ounces of meat.

While restaurants generally feel obliged to indulge diners with four chops per person, two will satisfy modest appetites and three are usually enough for more enthusiastic eaters. So a single rack of lamb will nicely serve two or three people, at two to four chops per person. A well-trimmed rack delivers enormous flavor, even when served in moderate amounts.

When you order a rack, ask to have the chine bones (the backbone) removed. Many retailers prefer to leave these attached because they help



hold the chops securely together, but this also adds quite a bit of weight, which shows up at the cash register. If you roast your lamb with the backbone attached, you'll have difficulty carving the rack into individual servings. Some butchers leave the backbone attached but score it between the ribs with a saw. These cuts make carving easier. The problem with this method is finding the exact spot where the butcher made the cuts. If you forget to ask, you can remove the chine bones yourself with a heavy cleaver.

If you're planning a dinner for two and would like to order less than the standard eight-rib rack, ask the butcher to cut your roast from the saddle end (the end closest to the loin). The ribs at this end have a larger "eye"—the center nugget—of lean meat and a nicer shape. The ribs closest to the shoulder end tend to be a bit smaller. My husband and I like to treat ourselves by roasting a partial rack

Hold the rack upright to get it nicely browned. Use the tongs to make sure all sides of the lamb come in contact with the hot pan, so the meat has a chance to caramelize.

Photos except where noted: Martha Holmberg



Photo: Matthew Kestenbaum

Pink, juicy meat and a crispy coating. Lamb is best served medium rare, as the flavor can become quite strong and the texture tough when cooked beyond medium.



"Frenching" the ribs for dramatic curves. The author pulls and scrapes away all the meat, fat, and sinew to make the rib bones neat and sleek.



Removing the deckle is easy if you follow the natural seams in the meat. Pull on the fat layer with one hand while you use a knife to cut with the other.

of lamb. We order a neat little five-rib rack and open a bottle of fine red wine.

"FRENCHING" FOR A CLEAN LOOK

Even if you have a helpful butcher, you'll probably still have to do some trimming when you bring the lamb home from the market. To maximize the rack's visual appeal and reduce unwanted fat, you'll want to trim the rack so that the rib bones are exposed and almost all visible fat has been removed. This is called "frenching" the rack.

Lay the rack on your cutting board so that the ribs are arching away from the board. Holding a sharp boning knife perpendicular to the bones, cut through the fat just below the eye, being careful not to actually cut into the eye. You can now easily remove the bulk of the fat covering the bones by sliding the blade of your knife along the ribs—starting at the cut you've just made—to their ends. Next, with the point of your boning knife, cut around each rib bone and remove the fat between them. The ribs should now be free of most fat, but to give the roasted rack a clean appearance, scrape the rib ends with your knife to remove the bits of fat and tendon that remain. You can also simply pull them off with your hands (see center photo at left).

The meaty part of the rack consists of two main layers: the eye and the "deckle," a thin layer of meat sandwiched between two layers of fat. Most butchers leave the deckle as part of the rack, but I prefer to remove it, creating a more elegant roast. Many people only trim the deckle away from the chops at the saddle end, where the eye meat is larger. To remove the deckle, simply cut along the natural seam that separates it from the eye. Start at the rib end and move your knife down the face of the rack between the fat and the meat (see bottom photo at left). The thick layer should come away easily. Leave a thin covering of fat on the meat; this will help keep it moist during cooking.



Mustard helps the crumb coating stick. Paint a thin layer on the seared rack.



Roll the rack in herbs and crumbs and then roast it in a hot oven.



Let the rack rest before carving for juicier, more tender chops.

ROASTING A RACK OF LAMB

The real charm of the rack of lamb is that it's so easy to prepare. The meat itself is so superb that the less fussing, the better. Simple, unadorned roasting is my favorite way to prepare the rack, but I also enjoy a mild mustard coating or a more complex herb-crusted rack (see recipes below right).

The roasting method has two steps—First sear the lamb and then finish cooking it in a hot oven. While heating the oven to 475°F, put a heavy-based, dry skillet over high heat. Season the lamb with salt and pepper. Using tongs or a meat fork, put the lamb, meat side down, in the skillet. With your tongs, hold the lamb against the skillet for a minute to give it a nice brown crust. Turn the meat to sear it on all sides for a total of four minutes.

After all sides of the meat have been seared, transfer the rack to an oval gratin dish (a standard roasting pan is too large for a single rack). Cover the rib bones with strips of foil so they don't burn and then put the dish on the center rack of the hot oven. The most accurate method for judging doneness is by temperature (see the sidebar below), but

How do you know when it's done?

Even the most experienced cooks have trouble judging the doneness of a rack of lamb by feel, so I always rely on my meat thermometer. Remove the meat from the oven when it has reached an internal temperature that is 5° to 10° lower than your desired doneness to allow for carryover cooking, which occurs during the five-minute rest before carving. This rest allows the juices to redistribute evenly and results in a moister and more tender roast. So for medium-rare meat, you should remove the roast from the oven when it has reached an internal temperature of 120°F. I don't recommend cooking lamb beyond medium because it begins to develop a strong, gamey flavor, and all its tenderness disappears.

Final temperature after a five-minute rest:

- rare—115° to 125°
- medium rare—125° to 135°
- medium—140° to 145°

generally the rack should reach medium rare in about 20 to 25 minutes.

CARVING AT THE TABLE

With the chine bones removed, carving the roasted rack is easy and quick. Use a carving knife to cut between the rib bones. Once carved, the chops will cool quickly, so you should carve at the table. Besides, you'll want to show off the beautiful rack by presenting it in its entirety.

Once you've cut the rack into chops, it's easy to make them look great on the plate. One way of doing this is to fan two or three chops on one side of the plate with the rib ends toward the center. You might even want to leave two or three chops together and serve them standing upright as a mini rack. Be sure to provide your guests with good steak knives.

HERB CRUST FOR LAMB

Lamb goes wonderfully with anything redolent of rosemary, thyme, savory, garlic, and olive oil. Some of my favorite accompaniments are garlic-roasted potatoes, ratatouille, and a gratin of zucchini. For this recipe, use only fresh breadcrumbs, which you can make in a food processor or with a cheese grater.

- 1 large clove garlic, chopped fine
- 2 Tbs. chopped fresh parsley
- 1 Tbs. chopped fresh thyme (or ¼ tsp. dried thyme)
- ½ cup fresh breadcrumbs
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 Tbs. Dijon mustard

Heat the oven to 475°F. In a shallow bowl, combine the garlic, parsley, thyme, and breadcrumbs. Moisten with enough olive oil to make the mixture hold together. Season the lamb with salt and pepper and sear it in a hot skillet. Remove the meat from the skillet and use a pastry brush to paint the meat side of the rack with the mustard. Roll the meat in the herb mixture to coat it. Roast the rack in the hot oven until it reaches the desired internal temperature (see sidebar at left). If you want a crispier crust, finish cooking the rack under the broiler for 2 min.

MUSTARD COATING FOR LAMB

This is a simple yet delicious coating. Use a good-quality Dijon mustard, as its flavor will permeate the finished dish.

- 2 Tbs. Dijon mustard
- 2 tsp. chopped fresh rosemary
- 2 Tbs. olive oil
- 1 Tbs. lemon juice
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

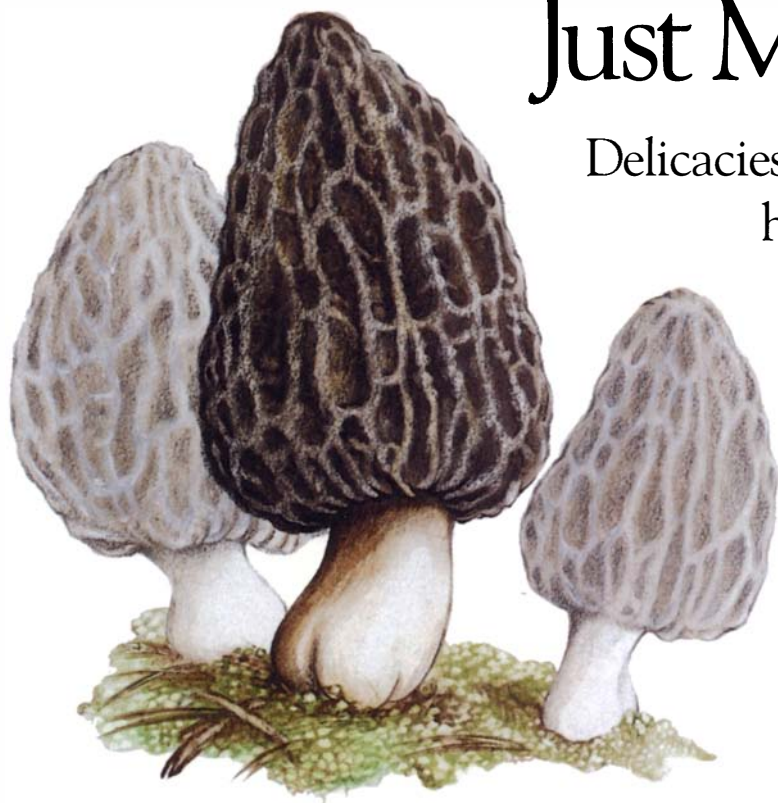
Heat the oven to 475°. Stir together the ingredients and sear the lamb; then brush the coating on the meat. Roast the lamb according to the method described above left.

Molly Stevens earned a grand diplôme from La Varenne cooking school in Paris, where she also worked at several Michelin-starred restaurants. She returned to the United States to become assistant director of the French Culinary Institute in New York City. Currently, she is a chef/instructor at the New England Culinary Institute in Essex, Vermont. ♦

Morels—More than Just Mushrooms

Delicacies from the forest floor
herald the arrival of spring

BY AMY FARGES



Sometime in sluggish, slushy March, just when I've despaired of ever going barefoot again, a "morel fax" inches its way into Aux Delices des Bois, my mushroom shop. A Michigan sighting! Cabin-fevered, I start planning the first meal: tiny, thumbnail-sized morels glossed with sweet cream butter; earthy slices of morel folded into a creamy risotto; giant morels stuffed with cheese and herbs.

This spongy, cone-shaped fungus gives gourmets a thrill and commands respect from foragers. While

mushroom gatherers may divulge the site of a chanterelle hotspot, the secret location of a morel patch is passed on only through bloodlines.

A SHORT GROWING SEASON

A morel is a hollow, ace-of-spades-shaped mushroom, full of little pits and ridges. At its opening is a narrow, tube-like stem. The rains of early spring trigger the morel season, and by mid-May the mushrooms are in full flush. Sadly, they're usually too wormy to harvest after late June. But in a good year, at the weather's whim, the morel season can stretch a month or so in each direction.

Morels thrive on misfortune and are regulars at burn sites and cemeteries—they love freshly turned earth. Morels are so sure to crop up in the ashes of a forest fire that the Oregon State Department of Agriculture auctions off the picking rights to these sites. This macabre mushroom also loves to pop up under diseased elms and in abandoned apple orchards.

But in no way does this mean that morels are easy to find. Elusive as the jackalope, the morel cleverly disguises itself in shades of brown, gray, and beige to blend in with its environment. I've never actually found a morel in the wild, but my

Plump, freshly gathered morels (like these at right) start coming to market in March and disappear again by early summer. Luckily, dried morels are available year-round.



ALWAYS COOK YOUR MORELS

Besides having a high-protein, low-fat profile, morels also contain very small traces of toxins. Fortunately, these trace toxins are neutralized by heat. To be safe, cook morels for a good fifteen minutes. It's also a good idea to avoid a steady diet of morels, to watch red wine intake during morel binges, and to never even taste a raw morel.

Mycologists strongly advise against eating any wild mushroom you can't positively identify. Unless you are an experienced mushroom hunter, it's best to buy your morels from reputable suppliers (see sources at right).

Bring dried morels back to life. With a good soak in warm water, dried morels regain their springy texture. One ounce of dried morels will weigh four to six ounces after reconstituting, draining, and pressing.

partner in Aux Delices des Bois did find one once in a gravelly driveway.

Where do they come from? The Pacific Northwest may well be the world's morel basket; a rollicking \$2.24 million worth of morels were shipped out of Oregon alone in 1993. This prime morel region extends east to Idaho, south to California, and as far north as Alaska, where pickers enter uncharted territory by horseback and by parachute. Others fill their saddlebags in Michigan, Maryland, and Missouri. Mexico has even offered morels in December, when the rest of us can only dream of spring.

While the morel has long been prized in Europe, environmental neglect has led to the demise of fresh morels there. Dried morels sold under French labels are usually harvested in the United States, China, or Turkey.

DELICIOUS FRESH OR DRIED

To select fresh morels, look for dry, unbroken specimens. Gray streaks in the pits usually mean mold is forming. The aroma should be of dead leaves and freshly turned soil. Any mushroom that smells dank or musty is past its prime. Sometimes fat white worms crawl out from morels, rubbing their eyes to see who disturbed their munching. Luckily, if you don't manage to pick them all out, the extra protein never did anybody any harm.

Morels make great houseguests if you treat them right. I stow them in an uncovered basket on the middle shelf in my refrigerator so that air circulates around them. They can keep this way for about a week, although fresher is better.

When morels aren't in season, it's still possible to enjoy them. While they don't freeze well raw, morels are great when sautéed first and then frozen. But the best way to enjoy morels when they're out of season is to buy dried morels. When dried, the morel's nutty, loamy flavor becomes even more intense.

In my opinion, morels reconstitute better than any other dried mushroom. They regain their firm texture without becoming chewy. Due to the water-weight loss, dried morels are pricey, at \$100 or more per pound. But take heart—a few morels will go a

long way. One ounce of dried morels will swell to about four ounces after being reconstituted.

You can dry morels yourself when the fresh crop is plentiful. I string up whole fresh morels—preferably the small ones—on fishing line. My apartment ends up looking like a laundry, with lines strung from window to bookshelf and back again. Some people strew them on window screens laid horizontally across two chairs. They'll also dry in the oven, with the temperature at the lowest setting. Drying can take a few days, depending upon the humidity. If they snap when you try to fold them, they're done. Store your dried morels in a glass jar, away from any moisture.

Reconstituting dried morels. Morels will reconstitute in about 45 minutes. Simply cover them in hot water (add a dash of cognac if you like) and give them a squeeze every few minutes to see how they're doing. Drain, press out the excess liquid, and you're all set. They'll keep another day in the refrigerator once they've been brought back to life. The reconstituting liquid, whether hot water or a higher-octane water-and-cognac combo, gives you mushroom stock. Reduced and strained, you get a concentrated mushroom jus.

GENUS MORCHELLA

As the season progresses, different species of morels crop up. These four *Morchella* species are edible, but watch out for the "false morel" (see below).

Morchella angusticeps is small and firm, with astonishing black ridges and neat rows of pits. This variety is so small that it's best cooked whole.

Morchella esculenta has gray-brown ridges and its pits are a bit deeper. Plump, curvaceous *esculenta* yields nice round slices that do well for interesting plate presentations.

Morchella deliciosa earns its second name. Also called the white morel, *deliciosa* is the last morel to appear. It has creamy white ridges and matching pits.

Morchella crassipes has flimsier walls with honey-colored ridges and buff-hued pits. It has a bumpy interior surface.

WATCH OUT FOR THE FALSE MOREL

The black sheep of the morel family is the *gyromitre*, which looks like a small brain that suffered a meltdown. Instead of growing upright, it spreads its wrinkled mass outward, with bulging folds and lobes. It isn't considered edible by mycologists and chefs alike, and eating the *gyromitre* is playing gastronomic Russian roulette. This fungus actually produces a chemical used in rocket propellant. I'd stay away.

Amy Farges owns Aux Delices des Bois, a New York City mushroom shop, with her husband, Thierry. She is training their 16-month-old son Julien in the finer points of morel spotting.



SOURCES FOR MORELS

Morels are sold in gourmet produce markets, some supermarkets, and by mail-order suppliers.

Aux Delices des Bois, 4 Leonard St., New York, NY 10013; 800/666-1232 or 212/334-1230. Dried morels; fresh when in season.

East Coast Exotics, PO Box 468, Toughkenamon, PA 19374; 610/268-0771. Dried morels; fresh when in season. Checks and money orders only.

Polarica, PO Box 880204, San Francisco, CA 94188; 800/GAME-USA or 415/647-1300. Dried morels; fresh when in season.

Summerfield Farm, 10044 James Monroe Hwy., Culpeper, VA 22701; 703/547-9600. Fresh morels when in season.

Vanilla, Saffron Imports, 949 Valencia St., San Francisco, CA 94110; 415/648-8990. Dried morels. Checks and money orders only.



Morels' tiny pits and folds are perfect receptacles for creamy sauces, like in this stew served with cornmeal pudding (recipe on p. 48).

Two dishes that celebrate morels

BY SAM HAYWARD

Every spring, I look forward to cooking with morels, and I've found that certain ingredients have a natural affinity to these springtime mushrooms. Morels crave rich dairy products, including fresh cream, *mascarpone*, and cultured items such as *crème fraîche* and sour cream. Morels are sensational with feathered game, such as grouse, pheasant, and partridge. I also enjoy morels immensely with firm-textured fish and shellfish, such as shad, snapper, monkfish, sea scallops, lobster, mussels, and Louisiana crayfish. In fact, I love morels with just about anything.

Fresh morels lend themselves to sautéing but are particularly wonderful simmered in soups and sauces. Sautéing over a relatively high heat tends to keep the mushroom's flavor locked in, while slow, moist cooking will diffuse the morel's flavor and aroma throughout the dish. Large morels are best split or quartered.

Many sources recommend thoroughly cooking all wild mushrooms—to neutralize allergens and toxins that might cause reactions in some people. But there's still lots of room for creativity while heeding this caution.

Cleaning morels is a necessity, but because morels have such an irregular surface, a traditional mushroom brush is useless. I find that the best method is a gentle, cool-water rinse under the spray-hose of my kitchen sink just before cooking. Being hollow, morels will fill up with water during cleaning, and they should be drained with a gentle squeeze before cooking. There always seem to be a few stubborn spruce needles clinging to the mushroom even after spray-cleaning; these must be

removed by agile fingers or a pair of tweezers.

The morel's woodsy-smoky-earthy flavor begs for a wine with a similar sense of *terroir*, or the earth it comes from. One of my favorite accompaniments for morels is a deep, mature red Burgundy or a Pinot Noir from the Pacific Northwest. Dishes like this morel and mussel stew are nicely contrasted by a crisp Alsatian Riesling or a similar-style wine from California.

CREAMY MOREL STEW WITH HASTY PUDDING

Hasty pudding is the Anglo-American analog of polenta. *Serves six as an appetizer.*

FOR THE HASTY PUDDING:

1 Tbs. unsalted butter
2 Tbs. cleaned, diced leek, white part only
2 cups water
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup stone-ground yellow cornmeal
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 egg white, lightly beaten
Butter for the ramekins or molds

FOR THE MORELS:

8 oz. fresh morels (or 8 oz. reconstituted dried morels, weighed after soaking and draining)
1 Tbs. unsalted butter
2 Tbs. minced shallots
1 cup dry Madeira
Few drops freshly squeezed lemon juice
1 cup *crème fraîche*
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups chicken stock
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
12 green peppercorns, lightly crushed
4 Tbs. chopped chervil leaves, more for decoration
2 Tbs. snipped fresh chives, more for decoration

For the pudding—Heat the oven to 375°F.

Melt the butter in saucepan. Gently sauté the leeks in the butter for 2 min. to soften. Add the water and bring to a boil. Slowly stir in the cornmeal. Reduce the heat and simmer 2 min., or until thickened. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Cool slightly and stir in the egg white.

Divide the mixture among six 4-oz. buttered ovenproof ramekins or molds. Put the ramekins in a shallow baking pan and pour enough boiling water in the pan to come halfway up the sides of the molds. Bake about 25 min., until set but tender. (A knife

inserted into the middle will come out almost clean.) Set the molds aside and keep warm.

For the morels—Cut large morels into smaller pieces. Melt the butter in a sauté pan over moderate heat. When the foam subsides, add the morels and sauté until soft but not browned, about 3 min. Add the shallots and cook for another minute. Add the Madeira and lemon juice. Cook over high heat until liquid is reduced by half. Add the chicken stock and again reduce by half. Add the *crème fraîche* and reduce over high heat until the sauce coats the back of a spoon. Season with salt, pepper, and green peppercorns. Stir in the chervil and chives. Taste and correct seasoning. Unmold the hasty puddings and nap with the morel stew. Decorate with more chives and chervil.

MORELS & MUSSELS WITH SAFFRON CREAM

I prefer to use farm-raised mussels rather than wild ones in this soup, as they give the broth a cleaner taste and they naturally pick up less sand. *Serves six as an appetizer.*

3 lb. mussels in their shells
2 Tbs. olive oil
1 medium carrot, diced
2 ribs celery, diced
2 medium leeks, white and green parts separated, cleaned, and diced
3 cloves garlic
12 black peppercorns, crushed
4 cups hard cider (or 3 cups dry white wine plus 1 cup apple juice)
A bouquet of fresh herbs: sprigs of thyme, bay leaf, rosemary, savory, and tarragon
1 lb. fresh morels (or 1 lb. reconstituted dried morels, weighed after soaking and draining)
1 tsp. saffron threads
1 cup heavy cream
Salt
Pinch cayenne
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup snipped fresh chives

Wash the mussels carefully, discarding any dead (open) ones and any that feel exceptionally heavy. In a large, nonreactive stockpot or Dutch oven, put 1 Tbs. of the olive oil, the carrot, celery, green parts of leeks, garlic, and peppercorns. Cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, for 4 min. without browning. Add the hard cider and the bouquet of herbs and bring to a rolling boil. Add the cleaned mussels. Cover the pot and cook for

An extraordinary soup. Tender morels and succulent mussels are suspended in a rich, creamy broth scented with saffron.



5 min., timing from the point when boiling begins again.

Meanwhile, sauté the morels and the white parts of the leeks in a skillet with the remaining 1 Tbs. olive oil for about 4 min. without browning.

Strain the mussel broth through a mesh strainer or colander set over another nonreactive pot or saucepan. Gently crumble the saffron between

your fingers and add it to the strained liquid. Add the cream, sautéed morels, and leeks and simmer until reduced to 4 cups. Meanwhile, pick the mussels from their opened shells, removing the mussels' "beards" as you go.

Add the picked mussels to the soup and season with salt and a pinch of cayenne. Remove the skillet from the heat, divide the soup

among six soup plates, and decorate with some snipped chives.

Sam Hayward is the executive chef at the Harraseeket Inn in Freeport, Maine. An amateur mushroom hunter, he looks forward to spring's first morel harvest all winter long. ♦

Slow-Rising Breads

Start with a yeast sponge to make chewy, delicious loaves

BY AMY SCHERBER



I'm a bread baker and I'm proud of that title. I enjoy getting my hands in the dough and shaping it into loaves. My greatest pleasure, however, comes from baking a beautiful loaf of bread for someone else to touch, taste, and enjoy. Sometimes I watch customers as they approach the counter: their eyes light up when they see the array of golden-brown breads and smell the sweet aromas of our offerings. While many factors come together to make great bread—tasty flour, careful handling, and a good oven to name a few—one of the most critical factors is time. If you want a loaf that is moist and chewy and has a complex flavor, you just can't hurry it along.

I find the sponge method of making bread a good compromise between the quicker straight-dough method, which produces yeasty-flavored loaves, and the more involved sourdough process. I begin by mixing flour, water, and a little bit of yeast to make a sponge; I let the sponge ferment for about eight hours, and then I mix it with more flour and other ingredients to make bread dough. In addition to letting the yeast and flour ferment in the sponge, I give the dough a long, slow fermentation, too. Not only does this produce a moister crumb, but it also allows the flavor of the yeast to dissipate so the taste of toasty wheat and other ingredients comes forward.

While this may sound like a lot of time to make one batch of bread, the actual work is only slightly more than when making a straight-dough bread. Three of my favorite breads to make with a sponge starter and slow fermentation are chewy Walnut Honey Bread, crusty Whole-Wheat Currant Rolls, and a loose-textured Italian Bread (see recipes on pp. 52–53). You can

Great bread takes time. Like sourdough bread, bread leavened with a sponge and allowed to ferment slowly will have a moist, chewy crumb and a crisp crust.

Photo: Ellen Silverman



Yeast thrives in a goopy flour and water mixture. Vigorously stir the sponge with your fingers to introduce air.

experiment with your own recipes too. The rule of thumb for a recipe that calls for one pound of flour is to use half the yeast, add 1½ cups of sponge, and decrease the water by a tablespoon.

A FLAVORFUL SPONGE FROM YEAST, FLOUR, AND WATER

A sponge starter, also known as a *poolish* in France and a *biga* in Italy, is made with yeast, flour, and water (see recipe on p. 52). In the bakery, I use fresh cake yeast because I like its mild flavor, but active dry yeast works fine and is more widely available. The yeast multiplies while the sponge ferments, so you don't need to put in as much yeast as you would if you were making a straight-dough bread.

I recommend using unbleached white bread flour in the sponge rather than whole-wheat or rye flour because the sponge should be elastic and bubbly in order to lift the bread dough. White bread flour is high in gluten and produces this elasticity.

The last ingredient is water. Breads around the world get much of their unique character from the local water. If you prefer not to drink the tap water in your area, you should use bottled water in your bread as well.

Temperature is important when mixing the sponge. You want to dissolve the yeast in water that is between 105° and 115°F. Water that's hotter than this will kill the yeast, and cooler water won't get the yeast going. For foolproof results, take the temperature of the water with an instant-read thermometer just before adding the yeast. Stir the yeast into the water and let it stand for five minutes. The water will turn cloudy and the yeast creamy, but it probably won't be bubbly. Some people recommend putting in a ¼ teaspoon sugar to kick-start the yeast. I don't like to use sugar in my breads or to get the yeast working too quickly, so I don't add sugar. If you want to see signs that the yeast is alive and active, stir in ½ teaspoon flour and wait ten to fifteen minutes. The yeast should start to bubble; if it doesn't, start again with new yeast.

Once the yeast is dissolved, mix it with the remaining water into the flour. Stir with a wooden spoon or your fingers until you have a stretchy, sticky sponge dough, about 100 strokes (see photo at left).

SPONGES RIPEN AT ROOM TEMPERATURE

After mixing, I transfer the sponge to an upright plastic container, which I cover loosely with plastic wrap so the sponge can breathe. I mark the level of the sponge and the time that I mixed it right on the container. This way, I can monitor its progress as it rises and ferments.

The sponge needs to sit and ripen at room temperature for about eight hours. You'll know that it's fully ripe and ready to use when it has risen up the sides of the container to about three times its original height and has begun to fall in the center (see photo at right). The ideal ripening temperature for the sponge is 75°. If the room is colder, the sponge will take longer to ripen. If the room is warmer, it will ferment faster. If you can't use the sponge within three hours of when it has fully ripened, cover it tightly and put it in the refrigerator. Before you use it, let it stand at room temperature for at least an hour.

Since you'll only need 1 to 1½ cups of sponge for each batch of bread, you'll have enough sponge for several batches of dough. After about three days, the sponge will become excessively tangy and lose its

leavening ability, but don't throw it out. Keep any leftover sponge in the refrigerator (up to ten to twelve days) and add one cup of it to your next batch of sponge for a tangier, more complex flavor.

SPONGE FOR FLAVOR, MORE YEAST FOR A PREDICTABLE RISE

Although the sponge has a potent supply of yeast, I recommend adding a bit more yeast to the bread dough. It gives the sponge a boost and makes the dough rise more predictably, which is better for my schedule. If you don't want to add extra yeast, be sure to catch the sponge when it's fully ripe—when it has risen to three times its original height and has started to drop in the center.

Once the dough is mixed, shape it into a ball, put it in a plastic container or a lightly oiled bowl, and cover it tightly. Let the dough rise for about an hour at room temperature for the flavor to begin to develop, and then refrigerate the dough overnight (or for at least eight hours) to continue developing. The dough will keep in the refrigerator up to two days before it gets too sluggish. It's possible to skip this long fermentation, but if you shape and bake the bread after a short rise, you'll taste more yeast, the crumb won't be as chewy, and the bread won't be as moist.

The next day, let the dough sit at room



Bubbly sponge is full of yeast but doesn't have a yeasty flavor. After fermenting for eight hours, the sponge starts to drop in the middle, signaling that it's ripe and ready to be mixed into bread dough.



See-through plastic containers are handy for keeping track of slow-rising bread. The author marks the time the sponge was mixed and its original height before leaving it to rise.



Add chunky ingredients by kneading, not stirring. Currants and sesame seeds are sprinkled on the Whole-Wheat Currant Roll dough and then incorporated by folding the dough like a letter. More kneading distributes them evenly throughout the dough.

temperature until it begins to rise again, about an hour to an hour and a half. Then shape the loaves, let them rise, and bake them as you would any other bread.

SPONGE

This sponge makes enough for two to three batches of bread, and it can easily be halved. *Yields about 4 cups.*

*½ tsp. active dry yeast (or 1 tsp. fresh yeast)
½ cup warm water (105° to 115°F)
1½ cups room-temperature water
1 lb. (3½ cups) unbleached bread flour (or all-purpose)*

Stir the yeast into the warm water to dissolve; let the mixture stand for 5 min. to activate the yeast. Measure the flour into a bowl. When the yeast mixture is ready, mix it and the room-temperature water into the flour. Stir with a wooden spoon or your fingers until you have a stretchy, sticky sponge, about 100 strokes.

Transfer the sponge to an upright plastic container and loosely cover with plastic wrap. Mark the level of the sponge and the time.

Let the sponge rise at room temperature for about 8 hours. It will be fully ripe and ready to use when it has risen up the sides of the bowl to about 3 times its original height and has begun to drop in the center. If you won't use the sponge within 3 hours, put it in the refrigerator. It will keep for 3 days. Before using it, let it stand at room temperature for at least an hour.

WALNUT HONEY BREAD

The walnuts naturally make the dough turn a beautiful subtle purple color, and the addition of walnut oil gives an even richer flavor to the bread. *Yields 2 loaves.*

*½ tsp. active dry yeast (or 1 tsp. fresh yeast)
½ cup warm water (105° to 115°)
½ cup room-temperature water
3 Tbs. honey
4½ tsp. walnut oil (or olive oil)
1 cup sponge (see recipe at left)
1 lb. (3½ cups) unbleached bread flour (or all-purpose flour)
1 Tbs. kosher salt
1½ cups walnut pieces, toasted
2 Tbs. flour for decoration*

Stir the yeast into the warm water to dissolve; let the mixture stand for 5 min.

Put the room-temperature water, honey, walnut oil, and the sponge in a bowl with the yeast mixture. Break up the sponge with your fingers and mix it for 2 to 3 min. until foam develops. Add the flour and salt. Lift the moist ingredients over the dry, turning the dough in the bowl until the liquid is incorporated and the dough forms a thick mass. Knead for about 1 min. in the bowl and then move the dough to a lightly floured surface. Knead for 5 min. by folding the dough in half, pushing down on it with the palms of your hands, and then lifting it and giving it a quarter turn. Use just enough flour on the counter to keep the dough from sticking. The dough will still be a little lumpy. Cover the dough and let it relax for 15 min.

Pat the dough until it's flat and then sprinkle the walnuts on top. Fold the top third of dough towards you and the bottom third away from you, as if you were folding a letter. Give the dough a quarter turn and repeat the folds. Knead the dough for 2 min. Don't worry if the walnuts stick out—they'll be easier to work in once the dough has risen. Shape the dough into a ball and put it in a plastic container or a lightly oiled bowl. Cover tightly, let it rise for about an hour at room temperature, and then put it in the refrigerator for 8 to 12 hours.

Remove the dough from the refrigerator and let it sit, covered, for 1 to 1½ hours.

Briefly knead to work the walnuts into the



A sponge creates a moist, airy texture, and walnuts give the bread a warm hue.

dough. Divide the dough in half. Flatten one piece slightly, and then fold and push the outside edges of the dough into the center to make a round ball. Dust the flour off part of the work surface and set the ball on it, seam side down. To seal the seams, cup the ball with your hands and move it in a small circle against the work surface. Repeat with the other piece of dough.

If you're using a baking stone in your oven, put the loaves seam side down and 3 in. apart on a baker's peel that has been sprinkled with cornmeal. Otherwise, put the loaves on a baking sheet that has been lined with kitchen parchment or sprinkled with cornmeal. Cover the loaves lightly with plastic film that has been crumpled first to keep it from sticking to the dough. Let the loaves rise for 1½ to 2 hours in a draft-free place until doubled in volume. The loaves will be fully risen when they feel light and airy when lifted slightly from underneath, and when a fingerprint pushed gently into the side of the loaf doesn't spring back.

Heat the oven to 425°. If you're using a baking stone, heat it in the oven for half an hour.

Just before baking, spoon 1 Tbs. flour onto the middle of each loaf for decoration. With a razor blade, gently slash an "x" on the tops of the loaves to allow a place for the air to escape and the loaves to expand. Put the baking sheet in the oven or slide the loaves from a peel onto the stone using a smooth, quick motion. Quickly spray the loaves and the oven 4 to

5 times with water from a spray bottle. Mist again in 2 min. Bake for 30 to 35 min., until the loaves are golden brown and sound hollow when tapped on the bottom.

WHOLE-WHEAT CURRANT ROLLS

This dough has a beautifully smooth texture and becomes firmer about half an hour after mixing, when the currants absorb moisture from the dough. The rolls are slightly sweet and the sesame seeds make them crunchy. *Yields 20 rolls.*

¾ tsp. dry yeast (or 1½ tsp. fresh yeast)
½ cup warm (105° to 115°) water
1¼ cups room-temperature water
1½ cups sponge (see recipe at left)
11 oz. (2½ cups) unbleached bread flour
(or all-purpose)
7 oz. (1½ cups) whole-wheat flour
1 Tbs. plus 2 tsp. kosher salt
½ cup sesame seeds
1 cup currants

Mix and knead the dough following the instructions for Walnut Honey Bread, adding the sesame seeds and currants in place of the walnuts. The dough will be sticky, but don't use much flour when kneading or the bread will be dry. Use a pastry scraper to lift and turn the dough.

After the dough has risen in the refrigerator and has come back to room temperature, divide the dough into 20 equal pieces. Shape each piece into a round ball on a lightly floured work surface. Put the rolls at least 1½ inches apart on a greased or parchment-lined baking sheet. Let the rolls rise in a draft-free place until doubled in size; this should take between 1½ and 3 hours.

Heat the oven to 425°. Put the rolls in, quickly spray the rolls and the oven 4 to 5 times with water from a spray bottle. Mist again in 2 min. Bake for 30 to 35 min., until the rolls are golden brown and sound hollow when tapped on the bottom.

ITALIAN BREAD

This wet, sticky dough makes loaves that are airy and crunchy. Right before baking, tug on the risen loaves to stretch them out. *Yields 2 loaves.*

¾ tsp. active dry yeast or (1½ tsp. fresh yeast)
½ cup warm (105° to 115°) water
¾ cup room-temperature water
1½ cups sponge (see recipe at left)
17 oz. (3¾ cups) unbleached bread flour
(or all-purpose)
1 Tbs. plus 1 tsp. kosher salt

Stir the yeast into the warm water to dissolve; let the mixture stand for 5 min. Mix the yeast mixture, the room-temperature water, and the sponge with a paddle in a stationary mixer on low speed until foamy. Then switch to a dough hook and add the flour and salt. Knead the dough on medium speed for 5 min. It will be elastic but rough-looking. Let it rest for 15 min. and then knead on medium speed for 1 to

2 min., until the dough leaves the sides of the bowl cleanly. It will still be quite wet and sticky.

Scrape the dough into a plastic container or a lightly oiled bowl. Cover tightly, let it rise for about an hour at room temperature, and then refrigerate it for at least 8 hours.

Remove the dough from the refrigerator and let it sit, covered, for 1 to 1½ hours.

Heat the oven to 450°. The dough will be very soft and sticky, so work on a well-floured surface. Divide the dough in half. Flatten one piece, gently pressing out some of the air bubbles. Fold the top third of dough toward you and the bottom third away from you, as if you were folding a letter. Use a pastry scraper to loosen the dough from the work surface. Press it flat, give it a quarter turn. Starting with the short end near you, roll it into a cylinder,

pressing the seams shut tightly. Put the loaf, seam side down, on a baking sheet that has been very generously sprinkled with cornmeal. Repeat with the other piece of dough.

Cover the loaves with crumpled plastic wrap and let them rise for about an hour. Just before baking, stretch each loaf to the full length of the baking sheet. Put the loaves in the oven, quickly spray them and the oven 4 to 5 times with water from a spray bottle. Mist again in 2 min. Bake about 30 min., until they sound hollow when you tap them with your fingers.

Amy Scherber makes crunchy loaves leavened by both sponges and sourdoughs at her bakery, Amy's Bread, in New York City. ♦



Sponge breads are good keepers. The Italian bread (top), Walnut Honey Bread (middle), and Whole-Wheat Currant Rolls (bottom) will stay fresh for days.

Delighting in Wild Greens

It may be a weed, but it might be delicious

BY JOHN N. KALLAS

Every spring, I plant a vegetable garden. But even before I select my seeds, weeds are already flourishing. I turn them under, and they come up again. Many sprout, flower, and fruit before I can harvest any of my garden crops.

So if life gives you dandelions, what do you do? You make dandelion salad, soup, and wine, of course. Treat your weeds like nature's garden of edible delights. In most gardens, about half the weeds are actually tasty, nourishing food.

A WINDFALL HARVEST

Here's what I do to harvest wild and cultivated plants from late winter through fall.

First, in early spring I gather and use whatever edible weeds I find in my garden. Dandelions, thistle, and chickweed can often be found as soon as the snow melts. Then I turn and prepare the soil. I plant my corn, tomatoes, broccoli, peas, and whatever else strikes my fancy.

Almost immediately, the weeds begin to grow. Throughout the growing season, I pull all the inedible weeds and toss them in the compost. I harvest the edible weeds as I need them, starting with those closest to my garden plants. This selective pulling gives the garden plants room to grow. As time goes on, the patches of wild edibles become smaller and smaller. When their number is severely reduced, my garden vegetables are just beginning to produce. I keep one place in my garden exclusively for weeds, however, so that I always have some to eat.

Leaving weeds in the garden is not for the faint of heart. Your spouse may complain about your untidy habits. Your neighbors might think you're slovenly and lazy. But be brave: you'll enjoy fresh, unusual ingredients that will be the envy of all the best cooks in town.

FIVE EDIBLE WEEDS

The plants that follow are some of the most common weeds in the United States and Canada. They



Chickweed makes a delicate salad green. Or use it in sandwiches, as you would alfalfa sprouts.

are arranged in order of harvest. A cautionary note: don't pick wild plants for food in an area that has been sprayed with pesticides or herbicides, anywhere close to the driveway or road, or in any other questionable location.

Chickweed (*Stellaria media*)—Chickweed, like dandelions, can grow virtually all year round in moderate climates. It's a small plant with tiny leaves and flowers that grows in and around gardens, among shrubs, and in lawns. Here are two ways to identify the weed: First, if you look closely, you can see a narrow line of short hairs running up each stem, sort of like a miniature Mohawk haircut. Second, if you look carefully at the tiny white flower, you'll see that what looks like ten petals is really five, so deeply split that they look like rabbit ears.

Delicate in flavor and texture, chickweed doesn't hold up to cooking, but it's an excellent mild salad green. I use chickweed leaves and young stems just like alfalfa sprouts in salads and on sandwiches.

For a continuous supply all spring, I harvest only the young growing leaves and stem ends. As each plant sends up new growths from the previously trimmed stems, I pick them. The older parts of the stems are stringy.

(Continued on p. 56)



Photo: John Rizzo

Wild greens with a French accent

BY GREG HIGGINS

At my restaurant in Portland, Oregon, I try to cook food that offers what the French call *goût de terroir*—the flavor of the region. Wild foods such as the many types of greens, mushrooms, tubers, and shoots that grow in the Pacific Northwest and other regions of the country are delicious, and they add a special regional character to my food. Using ingredients grown or foraged locally means that the food is fresh and at its peak. It's also part of the wise use of our agricultural resources.

SALMON WITH SHEEP SORREL SAUCE & DUMPLINGS

You can use French sorrel if the wild greens aren't available. I recommend a Chardonnay that isn't too oaky or a Pinot Gris. Serves six.

6 skinless salmon fillets, 5 oz. each
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

FOR THE DUMPLINGS:

1 lb. russet potatoes, preferably Yukon Gold, unpeeled, scrubbed
4 oz. sheep sorrel (or French sorrel) leaves (about 5 cups, lightly packed)
¼ cup olive oil
3 egg yolks
⅓ cup semolina
½ cup flour
½ cup fine fresh breadcrumbs
¼ tsp. grated fresh nutmeg
2 tsp. salt, more to taste
Freshly ground black pepper

FOR THE SAUCE:

3 cups fish stock (or 2 cups bottled clam juice and 1 cup water)
2 Tbs. minced shallot
1 tsp. minced garlic
6 oz. sheep sorrel (or French sorrel) leaves (about 7 cups, lightly packed)
½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the dumplings—Simmer the whole potatoes in lightly salted water until tender enough to allow a knife point to easily penetrate to the center. Drain and cool slightly.

Blanch the sorrel in boiling water for a few seconds and refresh in cold water. Drain thoroughly and press out excess moisture. In a food processor or blender, purée the sorrel with the olive oil and egg yolks.

Cut the potatoes into smaller pieces and pass them through a food mill or a ricer (the skins will stay behind) into a mixing bowl. Add the semolina, flour, breadcrumbs, puréed sorrel, nutmeg, salt, and pepper to taste. Knead the mixture lightly until it comes together to make an even dough. Cover the bowl with a towel and let rest for 30 min.

Lightly flour your hands and the work surface. Divide the dough into a few pieces and roll each piece into a ¾-in. rope. Cut the ropes into 2-in. pieces. Roll the ends of each piece to taper them and make football-shaped dumplings.

Cook the dumplings in a large pot of boiling salted water until they float to the top and feel firm, about 4 min. Remove with a slotted spoon, drain, and toss with a little oil to prevent sticking. Use immediately or refrigerate.

For the sauce—Combine the fish stock, shallots, and garlic in a small, nonreactive saucepan and simmer until reduced to about ⅔ cup. Put the sorrel leaves into the bowl of a food processor, add the hot stock reduction, and process about 30 seconds. With the motor running, gradually add the olive oil and salt and pepper to taste. Keep warm until ready to serve. The sauce may separate on standing, so whisk it well before serving.

To finish the dish—Run your finger over the salmon fillets to find any pin bones and pull them out with tweezers or by pinching them between your finger and a knife. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Set up a steamer (or a large pot fitted with a rack), bring the water to a boil, put in the fish, cover, and steam until just barely done in the center, 5 to 10 min., depending on the shape of the fillet.

Meanwhile, sauté the dumplings in a little oil or butter in a nonstick pan over medium-high heat until they're heated through and slightly browned. Ladle some warm sauce on each plate, arrange a few dumplings on one side and a salmon fillet on the other. Decorate with more greens, if you like, and serve immediately.

Greg Higgins cooked in Alsace and Burgundy before moving to Oregon, where he was the executive chef of the Heathman Hotel for nearly a decade. He recently opened his own restaurant, Higgins, in downtown Portland.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)—Many foragers suggest that you pick only the earliest spring dandelion leaves (before the plant flowers) because the greens become bitter with age. Well, frankly, I don't care how early I pick them—they're always bitter; they just get more so with time. If you like bitter greens, then try the young leaves raw as a salad. A basic oil-and-vinegar dressing helps to calm the bitterness. If you have only a moderate tolerance for bitter flavors, you can cut early greens crosswise into narrow strips and sprinkle them onto a salad of milder greens, such as chickweed, lamb's quarters, or amaranth. Used sparingly, dandelion greens add punch but won't overwhelm. Boiling or sautéing makes the greens less bitter so that they can be used like cooked spinach.

Dandelion flowers make an excellent addition to soups. They can also serve as an attractive garnish and can be eaten out of hand. Many children love to pick and eat them. Be careful to avoid the green bracts that surround the base of the flower, since they are extremely bitter. Dandelion wine is made from the flowers. For a good wine recipe, check Euell Gibbons' *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* (see the sidebar opposite).

Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*)—This unlikely wild edible is flavorful in spite of its ominous spines. Bull thistle is a biennial, which means it takes two years to complete its growth cycle. The first year that it grows from seed, it sends down a carrot-like taproot and sprouts a set of leaves. The second year, it grows rapidly from its taproot into a four- to six-foot plant with stalks that bear both leaves and purple flowers.

I collect the young first-year leaves and boil them for only a few minutes, enough to soften their spines. If the spines remain stiff after five minutes of boiling, I know the leaves are too old to eat. This plant gets increasingly fibrous, bitter, and stiff-spined with age. Because of the spines and hairs, I don't suggest you eat the leaves raw, regardless of age.

The first-year taproot is entirely edible and makes an excellent cooked vegetable. By early spring of the second year, when the plant begins sending up its flowering stalks, the taproot is too hard and fibrous to eat. Unless you want seed, don't let bull thistle grow to maturity the second year, because it will draw nutrients and water from other plants.

Sheep sorrel (*Rumex acetosella*)—Closely related to French sorrel (*Rumex scutatus*), which many people plant in their gardens, sheep sorrel is a small plant ranging from five to ten inches tall. Its leaves are shaped like long arrowheads, and the plant often has a reddish tinge, particularly when it reaches the flowering stage. Leaves vary in size from three-



Dandelion's leaves and flowers are both edible. The bitter leaves add punch to a salad; they're also good cooked like spinach.

quarters of an inch to about two inches long, and they never seem to become fibrous.

The leaf of this plant has a vinegary, lemony flavor that makes it an excellent trail nibble, a good addition to soup, and a fine salad green (see recipes on p. 55). Because of their lemony flavor, sheep sorrel leaves (either fresh or dried) make an excellent herbal seasoning for meat, poultry, and fish. I lay fresh leaves on the food before cooking or sprinkle dried leaves over the surface. The dried leaves also make a good tea.

Purslane (*Portulaca oleracea*)—Purslane is a succulent, persistent groundcover. Its reddish stems resemble networks of miniature pipes running along

Bull thistle offers edible leaves, which need boiling to soften, and a carrot-like taproot.





Sheep sorrel has the same lemony flavor as French sorrel.

the ground. The green leaves are tear-shaped and thick.

I use the whole aboveground plant when young, though the youngest stems are the choicest morsels. Purslane is excellent as a salad green and as an addition to soups and stews. The slightly slimy mouth-feel (similar to okra) of the raw plant may turn some people off, but the mild vinegary flavor is pleasant. The fresh green leaves and reddish stems make a pretty garnish for the dinner plate. Purslane is relatively high in iron and omega-3 fatty acids.

PLAY IT SAFE

A few basic rules apply to gathering and eating any wild food:

- ◆ Because some poisonous plants look like edible ones, correct identification is essential. The photographs in this article will help, but there is no substitute for having someone who really knows plants identify them for you until you're familiar with them. In some areas, you can take plants to your state's cooperative extension service for identification. Field guides can help if they have excellent photographs and drawings.
- ◆ Some plants have both edible and poisonous parts, and so you must know which parts can be eaten. The tomato is a good example of this principle in a domesticated plant: the fruit of the tomato is the only part of the plant that isn't poisonous. Buy a couple of books on wild edible plants and try only

Purslane's tart flavor works in salads, soups, and stews.



FOR FURTHER READING

Selected Weeds of the United States. Agricultural Handbook No. 366, ARS, USDA Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970.

Handbook of Edible Weeds, by James Duke. CRC Press, Inc., Boca Raton, FL, 1992.

A Field Guide to Edible Wild Plants (Eastern/Central North America), by Lee Allen. Guide #23. Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA, 1977.

Nature Bound Pocket Field Guide, by Ron Dawson. OMNIgraphics Ltd., Boise, ID, 1985.

Stalking the Wild Asparagus, by Euell Gibbons. David McKay Co., Inc., New York, NY, 1962.

Wild Edible Plants of the Western United States, by Donald Kirk. Color edition. Naturegraph Publishers Inc., Healdsburg, CA, 1975.

those parts that are mentioned as safe to eat. You'll be happy to know that no part of any of the plants described in this article is poisonous.

- ◆ Know the season or stage when the plants should be picked. Some fruits are poisonous until ripe. Others become poisonous, fibrous, or bitter with age.

- ◆ Learn the minimum preparation required to make the plant edible or palatable. Many wild foods can be eaten raw, but some need cooking or other processing.

- ◆ Whenever you try any food for the first time, you run the risk of a reaction. In rare cases, the weeds listed in this article may cause mild gas or a queasy stomach. People with food allergies should be as cautious as they are with any new food, particularly if it contains pollen.

- ◆ If you plan to study wild foods, you should look up each one and refer to it by the Latin name. The unique plant name will reduce your chances of confusing species that have the same moniker. For instance, both wild carrot and poison hemlock are called

Queen Anne's lace. I certainly wouldn't want to get these two plants mixed up.

John Kallas has a Ph.D. in nutrition and has been researching wild foods, teaching about them, and leading expeditions to gather them for more than fifteen years. He owns Wild Food Adventures in Portland, Oregon. ◆

White Chocolate Mousse Cake

A step-by-step approach makes this gorgeous cake easy as pie

BY SEBASTIAN BRECHT

Perfect cake with a perfect glaze—perfectly easy when you allow enough time to do each step right.

I make very elaborate cakes, but they're based on a simple philosophy: the cake must taste great and look great. I make that happen by designing cakes that give our senses what they want—contrast in flavors, textures, and colors. I pair dark colors with light ones, play flat and glossy surfaces against each other, offset acidic flavors with mild ones, and use bitterness to counterbalance sweetness.

Even though my cakes are complex, they're not out of the reach of an enthusiastic home cook. Careful planning, the right equipment, and a thorough

review of the recipe (days before you want to serve the cake) is all it takes to make beautiful cakes like this Floating Raspberry White Chocolate Mousse Cake. Best of all, you'll have the satisfaction of creating something that tastes better and is probably more attractive than anything you could buy at your local bakery.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

The cake has four separate components—cake base, mousse, raspberry purée, and dark chocolate glaze—



A sieve is all you need to create a smooth berry sauce. Frozen raspberries are softened, puréed, and sieved to create a raspberry sauce. The sauce is the base for the cake's "floating" raspberry center.

but none are difficult to make. The trickiest element is timing the preparation. Even the most experienced pastry chef couldn't whip up this cake in one day (see the sidebar at right). You can spread the cake's preparation over as few as three days to as long as two weeks. In any case, follow the recipe's guidelines regarding advance (or last-minute) preparation and assembly. If the finished cake is well wrapped, you can freeze it for over a week with no quality loss. Once defrosted, it should be eaten within a couple of days.

This white chocolate mousse cake has everything it needs to be a great dessert. The base is a chocolate cake made with almond paste. It's dark and moist, mildly sweet, and has the distinctive flavors of chocolate and almond. The delicate white chocolate mousse is light, soft, and mellow in both sweetness and flavor. However, the mousse suspends a raspberry purée that's been set with a touch of gelatin. This fruit layer is intense in both its color and its acidic flavor. The final touch is a glaze of melted chocolate on top of the cake; it provides a startling bittersweet chocolate flavor, firm texture, and color that stands out in contrast to the white chocolate mousse.

FLOATING RASPBERRY WHITE CHOCOLATE MOUSSE CAKE

The list of equipment you'll need is neither long nor unusual, but these pieces are vital. You should have an electric mixer; several stainless-steel mixing bowls; a rubber spatula; a whisk; a 7-in. springform pan; an 8-in. cake pan; and a flat, narrow spatula about 9 in. long. *Serves ten.*

RASPBERRY PUREE

This part of the recipe calls for an 8-in. cake pan because that's the round pan most people have. However, since you'll only need a 5½-in. circle of purée, you won't use all the purée. Use a smaller round pan if you have one; just fill it to a depth of ¾ in.

12-oz. package frozen raspberries
1½ tsp. unflavored powdered gelatin
¼ cup sugar

Line an 8-in. cake pan with plastic wrap, leaving about 4 in. of excess plastic hanging over the pan's sides.

Defrost the berries until soft. Purée them in a food processor for about 30 seconds, or until smooth. Set a fine sieve over a small, nonreactive saucepan. Pour a small amount of the raspberry sauce in the sieve and force it through with a spatula. Repeat the process until you have strained all the raspberry purée.

Sprinkle the gelatin over the purée. Allow the gelatin to soak and soften, about 5 min., and then stir. Heat the purée over medium heat and continue stirring until the gelatin melts completely. Add the sugar and stir until dissolved. Cool the raspberry mixture slightly and pour it into the plastic-lined cake pan. Freeze for an hour or until just set, and then drape the excess plastic over the top of the purée. Continue freezing for at least 12 hours. If you won't be using the purée within 24 hours, prevent freezer burn by popping it out of the pan and completely wrapping it in plastic or putting it in a plastic bag.

CHOCOLATE CAKE

The almond paste in this recipe keeps the cake moist.

1 large egg, room temperature
4 large egg yolks, room temperature
4 oz. (about ⅓ cup plus 1 Tbs.) almond paste, crumbled
⅓ cup confectioners' sugar
2 Tbs. all-purpose flour
⅓ cup unsweetened cocoa
1 tsp. sugar
1 oz. (2 Tbs.) unsalted butter, melted and cooled

CAKE COUNTDOWN

While this isn't a dessert you can whip up on a whim, you'll be surprised at how simple it is to make this cake when you break down the recipe into its basic components. No matter how you stagger the preparation, each step should be done within the recommended timetables.

Raspberry purée—two weeks to one day before assembly.

Chocolate cake—one week to one day before assembly. If you make the cake more than two days in advance, remove the cake from the pan and wrap it in plastic to keep it moist.

White chocolate mousse—immediately before assembly.

When you make the mousse, the cake and purée should already be prepared.

Assembly—one week to nine hours before serving. If you're going to assemble the cake more than 48 hours before serving it, wrap the assembled cake and freeze it. Defrost it in the refrigerator overnight before you glaze it.

Chocolate glaze—at least an hour before serving, but you must pour it on the cake immediately. The glazed cake may wait in the refrigerator for one day to an hour before serving, or you may wrap it and freeze it for a week. The cake should be frozen only once, however, so if you've frozen it during an earlier stage, don't freeze it again.



An impressive effect from a simple technique. To make the raspberry purée “float,” begin by spooning half of the white chocolate mousse over the cake layer in the springform pan. Set the circle of raspberry purée in the pan’s center and push it into the mousse until the purée is at the middle of the pan. The mousse will rise around the purée and up the pan’s sides.



Covering the evidence. To complete the illusion of the floating raspberry, add the remaining mousse to the springform pan; it will exceed the top of the pan. Then use the pan’s edges to guide a large metal spatula across the top of the cake to smooth it.

Heat the oven to 400°F. Butter and flour only the base of a 7-in. springform pan, or line it with a circle of kitchen parchment.

Put the egg, yolks, almond paste, and confectioners’ sugar in the bowl of an electric mixer. Mix at medium-low speed until smooth, thick, and pale, about 5 min.

Sift together the flour, cocoa, and sugar. Add these to the egg mixture and stir until just combined. Add the butter and mix for another 5 seconds, or until just combined.

Spoon the batter into the pan; it will be very stiff. Smooth the top. Bake the cake for 8 min., or just until firm to the touch; do not overbake. (When you insert a toothpick, it will come out with wet crumbs.) Cool it completely and, with the cake still in the pan, cover the top of the pan with plastic wrap. Store it in the refrigerator until you’re ready to use it.

You don’t need to remove the cake from the pan unless you’re making it more than two days in advance of assembly. In that case, release the cake from the pan, thoroughly wrap the cake layer in plastic, and keep it in the refrigerator.

WHITE CHOCOLATE MOUSSE

An airy texture is key to the mousse’s role in the dessert, so be careful when whipping the heavy cream. When using an electric mixer, there’s very little time difference between whipped cream that’s just shy of stiff peaks and cream that’s on the verge of becoming butter.

8 oz. good-quality white chocolate
(I prefer Callebaut), chopped fine
¼ cup water
1 envelope unflavored powdered gelatin
2½ cups heavy cream

Put the chocolate in a metal bowl (1 qt. or larger) that will fit snugly over a saucepan. (You also can use a double boiler.) Fill the saucepan with 1 in. of water and heat it until it’s on the verge of simmering. Remove the pan from the heat and set the bowl of chocolate on top of the saucepan. Stir the chocolate with a rubber spatula to encourage melting; however, don’t be concerned if the chocolate doesn’t melt entirely.

Pour ¼ cup water in another saucepan and sprinkle in the gelatin. Let the gelatin soak for 5 min., and then set the saucepan over medium heat and stir until the gelatin dissolves.

Pour ½ cup of the cream in another small saucepan and bring it to a boil. Remove the saucepan from the heat immediately.

Add the gelatin to the hot cream and stir until well mixed. Add this mixture to the melted chocolate and stir well with a spatula until the mixture is very smooth. Remove the bowl from the pan and allow the chocolate mixture to cool until it’s just warm.

Use an electric mixer to whip 2 cups cream until it just holds stiff peaks. Use a rubber spatula to gently fold half of the whipped cream into the slightly warm chocolate mixture. Add the remaining whipped cream and fold gently until smooth. Don’t overfold the mixture; it should still have a few distinct streaks of white chocolate and whipped cream.

CHOCOLATE GLAZE

Don’t be nervous about pouring chocolate over your beautiful smooth, white cake; not only will it make your dessert prettier, but it’s also a lot of fun. The honey is optional, but it adds a subtle flavor and sheen to the glaze.

1 oz. good-quality dark chocolate (I prefer extra-bittersweet Callebaut), chopped fine
⅓ cup heavy cream
1 tsp. honey (optional)

Put the chocolate in a small bowl. Heat the cream and honey in a small saucepan until simmering, and then remove the pan from the heat. Very slowly, pour a thin, steady stream of the hot cream onto the chocolate, stirring constantly with a rubber spatula until the glaze reaches the desired consistency. (Don’t use a whisk; it creates unwanted air bubbles.) You probably won’t use all the cream; you want just enough to create a glaze that is fluid enough to pour easily but has enough body to set properly. The mixture should be slightly thicker than heavy cream.

ASSEMBLING THE CAKE

Remove the cake in the springform pan from the refrigerator. (If you’ve already removed the cake from the pan, unwrap the cake layer and put it back in the pan now.) Spoon in half of the white chocolate mousse over the cake layer, until the mousse fills the springform pan a little more than halfway. Use a rubber spatula to smooth the mousse.



Hot cream and good chocolate create a glossy glaze. Start by slowly pouring the simmering cream onto finely chopped chocolate. Stir until smooth with a rubber spatula—don't use a whisk, which would create air bubbles. Add a little more cream, if necessary, to the melted chocolate to make a glaze that has body but is fluid enough to pour easily.



Remove the raspberry purée from the freezer and unwrap it. Use a 5½-inch flan ring to cut a smaller circle from the purée. (You also can use a small plate as a template, or merely "eyeball" it, and cut a circle with the tip of a sharp knife.) Lay the purée circle in the center of the springform pan and push it into the mousse until it "floats" approximately in the middle of the pan (see top photo at left). The mousse should begin to rise around the purée and up the pan's sides. Add the remaining mousse; it should slightly exceed the top of the pan. Using the pan's edges as a guide, scrape a large metal spatula across the top to remove the excess and to smooth the top of the mousse (see bottom photo at left).

Put the cake, uncovered, in the refrigerator for about an hour to let the mousse set, and then cover the top with plastic wrap. The cake must be refrigerated for at least 8 hours before glazing. At this point, you can also freeze the cake for up to a week. (If you do freeze it, you



must defrost it in the refrigerator overnight before you glaze it.)

Remove the cake, still in the pan, from the refrigerator. Pour the hot glaze on top. (If the glaze isn't fluid enough to run easily over the top of the cake, add a little more hot cream.) Rotate the cake so that the glaze covers the entire surface (see photo at right). Some of the glaze may drip over the pan; that's fine. If any bubbles appear on the glaze's surface, quickly and gently pierce them with the tip of a small, sharp knife. Return the cake to refrigerator for at least half an hour before you unmold it.

When you're ready to serve the cake, loosen the pan by heating it gently with a hair dryer on medium heat, directing the hot air around the sides of the springform pan. Use a back-and-forth motion and be careful not to overheat. It should take no more than 10 to 15 seconds for the pan to sufficiently loosen. Carefully slide the long, narrow spatula between the cake and the pan's sides to make sure the cake is ready to be removed from the pan. Unsnap the springform pan, remove the cake, and put it on a serving platter.

To cut the cake, heat a thin, sharp knife with a hair dryer or the flame of a gas stove. Slice the cake gently using single downward motions, one piece at a time, and arrange the slices on individual plates. If you like, decorate with fresh raspberries and white chocolate leaves.

Don't be afraid to pour warm chocolate on top of the cake; the chilled white chocolate mousse can stand up to the pressure. Pour the chocolate glaze on top of the mousse cake and rotate the cake so glaze runs and coats the entire surface. Don't worry if the glaze drips over the pan's edges. The cake needs just another half hour in the refrigerator before it's ready to serve.



Sebastian Brecht is a graduate of the French Culinary Institute in Manhattan. Once the pastry chef of four-star restaurants, he now supplies unique desserts to Dean & DeLuca, as well as to several catering companies. ♦

One Soup, Four Wines

A delicious experiment illustrates the logic behind matching wine and food

BY JOSH EISEN

How do you pair food and wine? There's endless talk about this question, and as a wine writer I've certainly added my opinion to the debate. But as a wine teacher, I've found that the best way to understand wine-food compatibility is to taste specific wines with specific foods. Tasting them yourself is the only way you can decide what works best for you, and with some guidelines you can learn why a pairing works—or doesn't work.

I've designed a wine and food tasting in which I serve one dish—a simple but flavorful white bean

soup—with four very different wines. As the tasting progresses, I add new ingredients to the soup. This arrangement shows how the wine affects the taste of the dish and how different flavors in the food affect the taste of the wine.

WINE WITH FOOD: A BALANCING ACT

Balance is key when creating a complementary relationship between wine and food. A perfect example of imbalance can usually be found at wedding receptions. When you first toast the bride and groom, a dry Champagne tastes fine; but with the wedding cake, drinking the same Champagne becomes a mouth-puckering experience. Eating cake makes the mouth want something sweet again, and a Champagne that isn't sweet comes as a sour shock. That's why a sweet dessert needs a sweet wine.

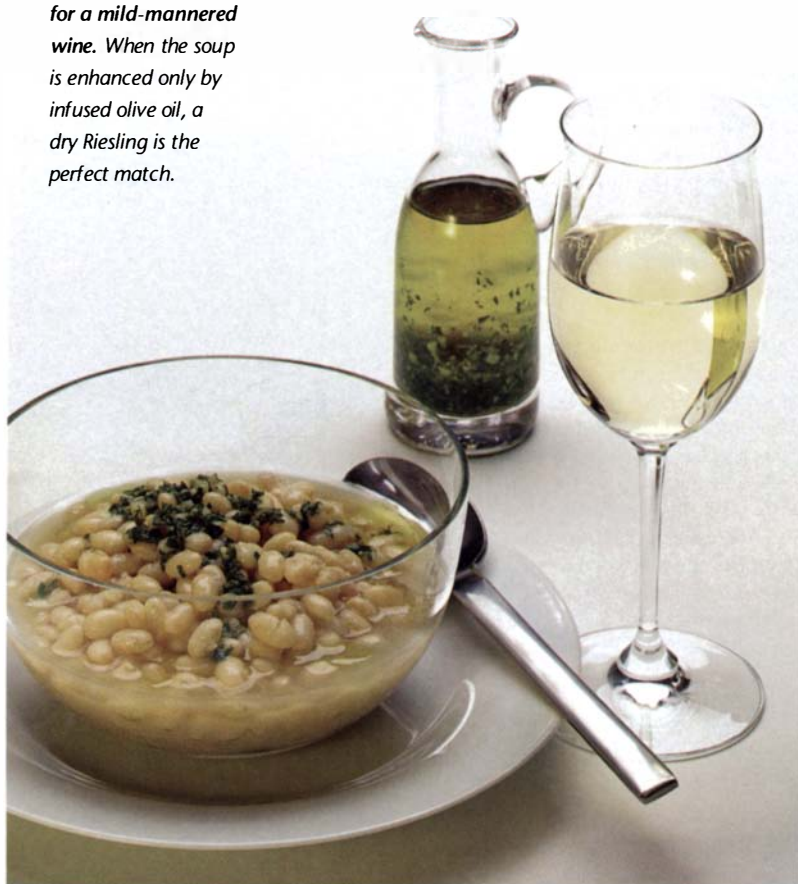
Every wine presented here tastes good on its own, but your perceptions of the wine will change when you sip them with the soup. You'll find that each wine has its "moment" as the best, depending on which elements have been introduced into the soup.

SUBTLE SOUP, DELICATE WINE

Start the tasting with a small bowl of the basic bean soup flavored with a tablespoon of the infused oil. The first wine you'll try is a dry Riesling. (For specific wine descriptions, see the sidebar on p. 64.) This wine is aromatic, fruity, and delicate. The soup is silky, full-bodied, and subtly flavored, and the olive oil gives it a complex and pungent aroma. The Riesling and the soup enhance, but don't overpower, each other.

Try the next wine—a buttery Chardonnay that has spent time in new oak. Compared to the Riesling, the Chardonnay has a heavy, rich, almost fat feeling in the mouth. Taste the Chardonnay with the soup and the soup's flavor seems to shrink in size. The soup's delicate aromas and silky texture are still there, but you have to look for them. The combination isn't unpleasant, but the wine is the dominant flavor. In conjunction with the Riesling, the soup was perfectly balanced. With the Chardonnay, the

A simple dish calls for a mild-mannered wine. When the soup is enhanced only by infused olive oil, a dry Riesling is the perfect match.





Author Josh Eisen pours the first wine in the tasting, a hands-on demonstration of how wines and food interact. The tasting calls for four different wines—the perfect number for turning the experience into a small dinner party.

soup seems lackluster because the full body of the wine is out of balance with the delicacy of the soup.

Follow the Chardonnay with the Cabernet/Merlot blend at room temperature. The wine and soup make a passable combination, but the wine obscures the beans' silkiness and subtlety—qualities that had been exciting and delicious with the Riesling. The red wine obscures the soup, but not in the same way as the Chardonnay. The Cabernet/Merlot has too much fruit and not enough acid, and the soft fruitiness of the wine overpowers the simple soup.

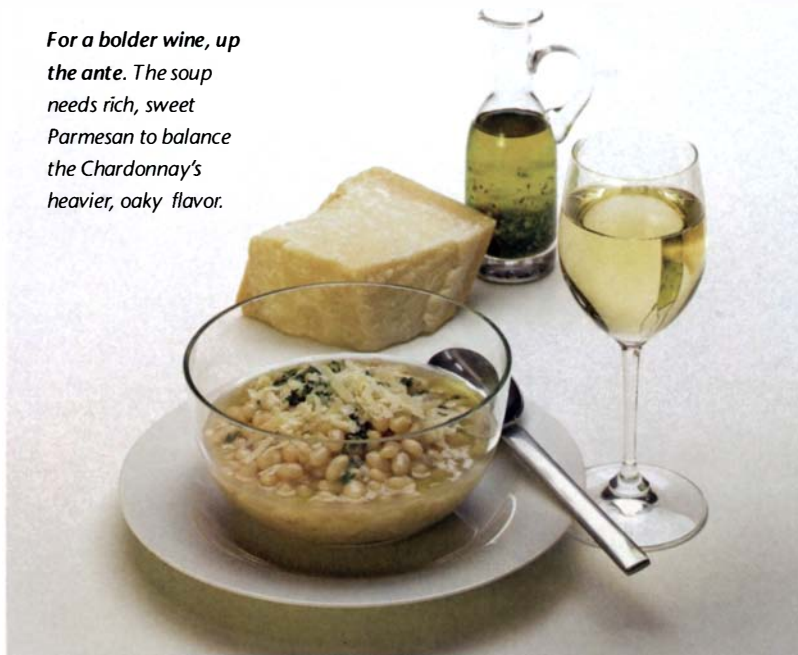
A RICH CHARDONNAY NEEDS BOLD FLAVORS

Now grate about a tablespoon of Parmesan cheese into each bowl of soup—the scenario changes

completely. Suddenly, the Chardonnay comes into balance and is a stunning partner for the soup. This apparent change of heart happens because the cheese makes the soup taste richer and fuller, and the Parmesan's milk fat absorbs the wine's tannins. The sweet richness of the Parmesan is a good balance for the Chardonnay's rich, vanilla fruit. If you taste the Riesling with this version of the soup, you'll find that the wine somehow has become weak and flat.

Now try this incarnation of the soup with the Cabernet/Merlot blend. You'll find the combination has no special dimension; in fact, the soup tastes rather flat. Again, the problem is the wine's fruitiness, which still overpowers the dish. Even

For a bolder wine, up the ante. The soup needs rich, sweet Parmesan to balance the Chardonnay's heavier, oaky flavor.

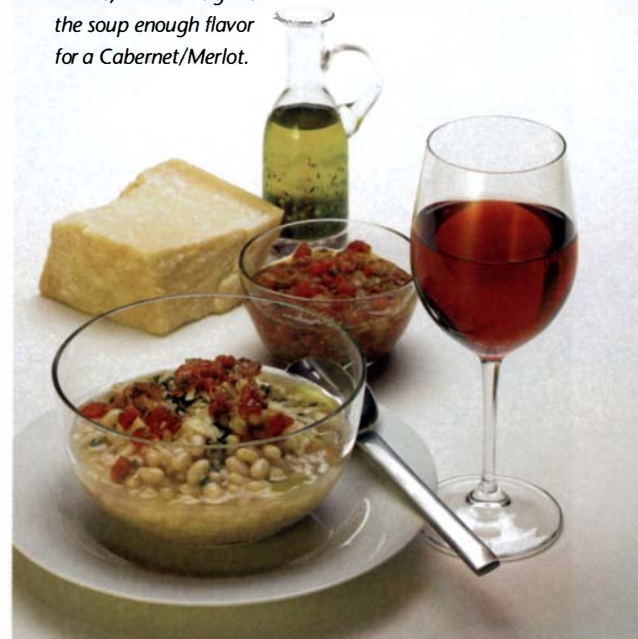


the strong flavor of Parmesan doesn't give the soup enough strength to stand up to the wine.

COMPLEX CONTRASTS CALL FOR A RED

The final version of the soup incorporates a blend of slowly sautéed tomatoes, onions, and herbs (called *sofregit* in Spanish). When you add a couple of spoonfuls of this mixture to the soup, the dish changes altogether. Now there's a lush, succulent feel to the soup, with a full range of flavors. The tomatoes make the soup both sweeter and more acidic, and these qualities give the Cabernet/Merlot a springboard. The same qualities—fruitiness and acidity—that made this wine a poor choice in other versions of the soup now can be enhanced. In fact, at this point it's best to serve this wine just cooler than room temperature to bring out its fruit flavors and make the acidity more prominent. Together, the soup and wine taste balanced and alive, and they're a pleasure to

A new addition makes the right wine choice go from white to red. A sofregit of slowly sautéed tomatoes, onions, and herbs gives the soup enough flavor for a Cabernet/Merlot.



eat together. The wine seems bright and lively without dominating your taste buds or the soup.

If you were to try this version of the soup with a white wine, the combination would be underwhelming. White wines seem to wither and lose almost all their flavor in the face of acidic tomatoes.

The final wine is another red—this time a Cabernet Sauvignon that's rich, concentrated, and aged in new oak. Taste this pairing and you'll find the wine dominates. The Cabernet is just too heavy, earthy, and intense for the soup, even with the tomato, onion, and herbal flavors of the *sofregit*. The Parmesan helps, but the combination is still merely fair, not dazzling. The lighter red wine more closely

CHOOSING THE WINES

I used Trefethen wines in creating this wine and food test, but other wines can be substituted if they approximate the wines that I used in flavor, style, weight, and balance. Of course, the results will be somewhat different, but the fundamental transitions and differences between wines will still be apparent. To make the job of finding other wines easier, try to find a knowledgeable wine merchant.

Here are the wines I used and suggestions of what to look for in choosing replacement wines.

1992 White Riesling Trefethen, or look for a dry young Riesling that's fresh and delicate. If

you can't find a Riesling, don't substitute Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc; instead, use a Pinot Blanc or a Pinot Gris.

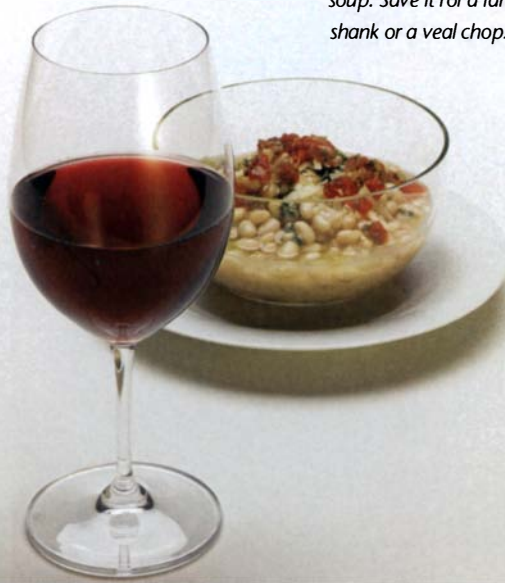
1987 Library Selection Chardonnay Trefethen, or try a fully evolved Chardonnay from the United States or a Burgundy such as Puligny-Montrachet. Look for harmonious balance between oak, fruit, and acidity, where new oak is not the dominant flavor.

NV Eshcol Trefethen (68% Cabernet Sauvignon, 32% Merlot), or substitute a young Cabernet/Merlot blend, or a Cabernet with ample concentrated fruit and soft,

ripe tannins. It should be well balanced, easy to drink, and made without using new oak barrels. Look for an inexpensive, simple, and young red wine with lots of fruit and soft tannins.

1989 Estate Reserve Cabernet Sauvignon Trefethen, or look for an outstanding reserve Cabernet Sauvignon where the oak is not a dominant flavor. Look for good fruit concentration, elegance, and complexity in wines from the United States, Bordeaux, Australia, New Zealand, or Chile.

Too much, too soon. A California Cabernet can be a fine wine, but it's too much for this soup. Save it for a lamb shank or a veal chop.



matches the soup's level of richness and intensity. Save the Cabernet for a lamb shank or veal chop—which could follow the soup.

WHITE BEAN SOUP

This soup is easy to make, and much of it can be prepared a day before serving. You can follow this soup with a simple main course such as grilled sausages, steak, or lamb. (Any of those dishes would be great with the soup's "losing" wine, a reserve Cabernet.) *Yields 6 cups, which will serve four as a first course, or eight to ten in a tasting.*

1½ cups dried white beans
4 medium cloves garlic, peeled
1 large sprig rosemary
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Rinse the beans and soak them in 6 cups of cold water for 8 hours or overnight. Drain and rinse the beans. Put them in a large, heavy pot and cover with 4 cups cold water. Add the garlic and rosemary sprig. Gently simmer, covered, for an hour, or until the beans are tender. When the beans are cooked, add salt to taste.

Alternatively, do not soak the beans but put all the ingredients in a heavy flame- and ovenproof ceramic or enameled-steel pot. Bring to a boil on the stove and then put the pot in a low oven (about 250°F) and bake until the beans are tender. This will take 4 to 8 hours, depending on the freshness of the beans.

The beans may be cooked a day or two in advance and stored, tightly covered, in the refrigerator.

When ready to serve, remove the rosemary sprig and heat the beans. If you like, purée 1 or 2 cups of the beans and add it back to the soup. Add salt and pepper to taste.

INFUSED OLIVE OIL

This recipe is best with two olive oils: a "regular" light-yellow oil and an extra-virgin, which should be deep green and very fragrant. The extra-virgin oil functions as

much as a seasoning as it does an oil. This can be made up to two days in advance and stored, tightly covered, in the refrigerator. *Yields ⅔ cup.*

¼ cup regular olive oil
1 Tbs. minced garlic
1 Tbs. minced fresh sage
1 Tbs. minced fresh rosemary
2 Tbs. minced fresh flat-leaf parsley
¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

In a small pot, heat the regular olive oil. Add the garlic and herbs. When the oil begins to sizzle, turn off the heat and let it sit; the herbs will have turned bright green. Allow the oil to cool a bit and add the extra-virgin olive oil. Stir and add salt and pepper to taste. The mixture should be heavily seasoned, as a small amount will flavor each bowl of soup.

SOFREGIT

A *sofregit* is one of the most basic elements in Spain's Catalan-style cooking. You'll need a heavy pan, a very low flame, and patience. The long, slow cooking makes the tomatoes and onions taste sweet, rich, and complex. The *sofregit* can be prepared five days in advance and stored, tightly covered, in the refrigerator. *Yields 1¼ cups.*

⅓ cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 cup chopped onion
1 Tbs. minced fresh garlic
1 cup peeled, seeded and chopped plum tomatoes
(fresh or canned)
1 Tbs. minced fresh flat-leaf parsley
1 Tbs. minced fresh sage
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat a heavy sauté pan and pour in the olive oil. When the oil is hot, add the onions and cook over low heat until they turn soft and golden brown, about 20 min. Stir in the garlic and cook until it begins to color slightly, about 5 min. Add the tomatoes and cook slowly until they begin to blend with the onions, about 20 min. Add the parsley and sage and cook for another 10 min. Season with salt and pepper.



Soup accessories. Parmesan, infused olive oil, and sofregit all have a role in determining which wine best matches the white bean soup.

Josh Eisen is a freelance food and wine writer. He, his wife, a cat, and more than 700 bottles of wine live happily in a one-bedroom apartment in New York City. ♦

Fragrant, Pungent Coriander

Could this be the world's most popular herb?

BY CAROLYN HAYNES

It may sound funny, but to me, coriander is as essential to food as salt. Eaten raw, this flat, serrated leaf is fresh, pungent, and a little bit piny. Cooked, its flavor turns mellow and savory, and provides a warm background to other flavors. Fresh coriander is an indispensable part of daily cooking in most parts of the world, and it may well be the world's most popular herb. In North America, fresh coriander is finding its way into the



Keep coriander's bright, bold flavor under wraps. To preserve the aroma, flavor, and texture of the fresh herb, stick the roots and stems in a jar of water, cover the leaves with a plastic bag, and refrigerate (see photo at left). The coriander should stay fresh for at least a week.

Assertive coriander turns subtle when cooked. You may not be able to tell that there's coriander in this dish of rice with pigeon peas (at right), but you'd miss it if it weren't there.



everyday repertoire of many cooks who fell in love with it when eating Mexican, Chinese, or Indian food.

CILANTRO = FRESH CORIANDER

Friends get impatient when I talk about “coriander leaves,” insisting that the correct name is cilantro. Cilantro is in fact the Spanish word for coriander leaves. I’ve also heard it called Chinese parsley, and in Indian markets it’s often called *hara dhanya*. Technically, “coriander” refers to the entire plant *Coriandrum sativum*. The leaves, roots, and seeds are all used in cooking, but they aren’t interchangeable. The roots have a stronger, more bitter flavor than the leaves. Thai and Cambodian cooks use coriander root to flavor stocks and curry pastes. The light brown spherical seeds have an altogether different taste. This spice is quite common in Indian curries, and it’s also used whole to flavor pickles. Before you begin cooking a recipe,

make sure you’re clear about what it’s calling for—fresh coriander or coriander seeds.

You either love it or hate it. As hard as it is for me to believe, not everyone loves fresh coriander. Though taste experts aren’t sure if it’s a matter of genes or familiarity, for some people the smell of fresh coriander is fetid and the taste soapy. While the chemical components in coriander leaves are the same ones found in less controversial foods such as limes, experts believe that it is the proportion of these coriander flavor components that may be sensed pleasantly by some and negatively by others. In other words, while most people love coriander, for some people, coriander just doesn’t taste good.

SMELL IT BEFORE YOU BUY IT

Contrary to what many cookbooks say, there’s no adequate substitute for fresh green coriander leaves. Dried ones have already lost their flavor by

the time they're fully desiccated, and parsley shares nothing with coriander except a deep-green color (though flat-leaf parsley sometimes looks a bit like coriander).

Good coriander leaves are extremely fragrant, so you should be able to smell them from a distance. Look for coriander that's tender, aromatic, and very green. It will keep longer if it still has its roots attached. To be sure that it is coriander—not flat-leaf parsley—and that it's aromatic, lightly bruise a leaf to release the scent. Don't be taken in by beautiful looks: if it has no aroma, it will have no flavor. Avoid wilted bunches with yellowing leaves. While they may smell aromatic, they'll spoil quickly even when properly stored. They also won't be able to add that critical splash of green color that visually enlivens dishes.

Keeping it fresh—Once you have fresh coriander home, pick out any wilted leaves and put it in a jar like a bunch of flowers, with its roots or stem ends submerged in water. Don't wash the bunch before storing it—water on the leaves will hasten rot. Cover the leaves with a plastic bag and put the whole thing in the refrigerator. Change the water every two days or so, picking out any wilted leaves when you do, and the coriander will stay fresh for at least a week.

When I don't have the refrigerator shelf space to spare for a jar of coriander, I wrap the leaves very tightly in aluminum foil and toss this airless package anywhere in the refrigerator. Another method is to wrap the coriander in a moist—not wet—paper towel and refrigerate it in a resealable plastic bag or an airtight plastic container.

If you don't have easy access to fresh coriander, when you do get a bunch you can freeze the leaves instead of refrigerating them. Make a paste or a chutney in the blender with coriander, water, and, if you like, other flavorings (see recipe for Coriander Chutney, opposite). Pour this mixture into ice-cube trays, freeze them, and then transfer the cubes to a plastic bag. I have also had success stuffing coriander leaves into ice-cube trays, filling the trays with water, and freezing. The leaves darken slightly and get soft, but the flavor stays strong. I use these leaves only in cooked dishes.

Wash it with a dunk and a swish. If the coriander still has roots attached, twist them off (save them if you're planning to cook Thai or Cambodian food). Carefully pick through the rest of the plant, removing any blackened, yellowing, or brown-edged leaves. To wash the dirt and sand off the leaves, dunk the coriander in a bowl of water, swish it around, and then let it float for a few seconds. Take the leaves out of the water and repeat the process with fresh water until no grit is left on the bottom of the bowl.

Once the coriander is clean, gently pluck the leaves from the stems, being careful not to string along any tough fibers from the stem. There are those who recommend using only the leaves, but I am not a purist about this. Certainly don't use the stems if they're tough or woody. When using coriander as a garnish, I use only leaves, leaving them whole or chopping them coarse. When I'm mixing a large amount of fresh coriander into a salad, again I'd use only the leaves. But when cooking coriander in dishes like the potato kebabs, I say use leaves and stems as long as both are tender and fresh.

HOT AND BOLD FLAVORS COMBINE WELL WITH CORIANDER

Once you have a sense of the aroma, appearance, and taste of coriander, start thinking of good combinations. Fresh coriander belongs with tomatoes, onions, and hot green chiles, ingredients commonly found in Mexican and Caribbean food (see the recipes for Guacamole with Coriander and Yellow Rice with Pigeon Peas on p. 70). Try coriander leaves in your favorite gazpacho or salsa recipe and you'll suddenly realize what's been missing.

Let the dirt and sand fall away. To clean fresh coriander, pick out any wilted or yellow leaves, swish the leaves and stems around in a bowl of cool water, and then lift the herb out of the water, letting the grit sink to the bottom. Repeat until the water is free of grit.



Coconut and coriander are natural partners. Blended together with chiles and lime juice, the pair make a hot chutney that enlivens fish, fritters, rice, or whatever else you choose to spoon it over.



It's impossible to think of coriander without thinking of ginger. A standard Indian green *masala* (or fresh spice mixture) consists of fresh coriander leaves, green chiles, onion, ginger, and cumin. Sauté the ingredients lightly in oil or butter, adding the coriander at the last minute, and then fold them into an omelet. Or let the same team of ingredients flavor a chicken, meat, or vegetable dish like the Pakistani potato kebabs (see recipe on p. 70).

Coconut and coriander also blend well together. The freshness of the coriander cuts through the creaminess of the coconut in preparations like Coriander Chutney. Toss coriander as a garnish on a Thai coconut soup where it collaborates with the flavors of the coconut, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, and galangal.

Sprinkle chopped coriander over curries and vegetable dishes. Mix two or three tablespoons of chopped coriander into your favorite salad. Make a fresh green salsa by grinding large quantities of coriander leaves with lime, onion, green chiles, and garlic—or leave out the lime and stir raw rice into the paste and cook to make Mexican green rice.

The more I experiment with this herb, the more convinced I am that you can never have too much fresh green coriander.

CORIANDER CHUTNEY

This thick paste is my friend Duchi's version of a traditional South Indian coriander-coconut chutney. If you have a mortar and pestle, try Duchi's method of crushing the coriander, coconut, and green chiles, and then adding the lime juice, salt, and sugar. For a quicker version, throw the ingredients in a blender or food processor.

Yields about 1 cup.

1 cup coriander leaves and stems, tightly packed

1 cup fresh or dried grated coconut

1 to 2 hot green chiles, cored and seeded

2 Tbs. lime juice

½ tsp. salt

1 tsp. sugar

1-in. piece fresh ginger (optional)

1 clove garlic (optional)

Water

Put all the ingredients except the water in a blender or food processor. Add ¼ cup of water and blend. Scrape down the sides and keep adding water and blending until the mixture is a thick paste. The goal is to use just enough water to rehydrate the coconut but not so much that the paste is watery.

YELLOW RICE WITH PIGEON PEAS

(Arroz con Gandules)

This is a classic Puerto Rican dish. Look for annatto (*achiote*) seeds and pigeon peas (*gandules*) in Latin American markets.

Serves two to four.

2 Tbs. oil
1½ tsp. annatto (achiote) seeds
½ cup chopped onion
½ cup chopped green bell pepper
2 cloves garlic, minced
½ cup chopped tomatoes
1 Tbs. capers
½ tsp. cumin seeds, toasted and ground
(or ½ tsp. ground cumin)
1 tsp. salt
½ tsp. oregano leaves
1 cup cooked pigeon peas (gandules)
⅓ cup fresh coriander leaves, tightly packed
1 cup uncooked rice
1½ cups water

In a small pan, heat the oil over medium heat. Put the *achiote* seeds in for a minute—long enough to release their yellow color and flavor but not long enough to turn too brown. The oil should be a bright yellow-orange. Strain the oil into a medium saucepan, and discard the *achiote* seeds.

Add the onion to the oil and sauté until translucent, about 5 min. Add the green pepper and garlic, stirring lightly. Add the tomatoes, capers, cumin, salt, oregano, pigeon peas, coriander, and rice. Stir thoroughly over medium heat for 2 min. and then add the water. Stir frequently until the water comes to a boil and reduces until it's level with the rice. Turn down the heat to low, cover, and cook for another 20 to 25 min., until all the water is absorbed.

PAKISTANI POTATO KEBABS

(Alu Kebab)

I like to use unpeeled Red Bliss potatoes for a nice texture and color. Although these kebabs are delicious plain, I recommend serving them with a mint or coriander chutney.

Yields about 20 kebabs.

1¼ lb. (4 medium) red potatoes
½ tsp. salt
¼ cup finely chopped onion
4½ tsp. finely chopped fresh ginger
1 green chile, cored, seeded, and chopped fine
¾ tsp. cumin seeds, toasted
⅓ cup chopped coriander leaves and stems, tightly packed
6 Tbs. breadcrumbs
2 Tbs. lime juice
½ tsp. salt
⅛ tsp. finely ground black pepper
½ cup clarified butter, vegetable oil, or combination of both

Put the potatoes in a saucepan, cover with water, and add the salt. Cover and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and cook for another 15 min., or until the potatoes are thoroughly cooked and soft enough to mash. Drain and cool.

In a large mixing bowl, mash the potatoes with a potato masher or a large spoon, leaving them a little chunky. Add the onion, ginger, chile, cumin seeds, coriander, breadcrumbs, lime juice, salt, and pepper. Blend thoroughly, using your hands if necessary. Let this mixture stand for 15 min. and then shape into small patties, about 2 in. in diameter and ½ in. thick, taking care to smooth out the edges so that the patties don't come apart as they cook.

Heat the butter or oil in a heavy skillet. When it's sizzling hot, put as many patties in the pan as will fit without touching. Turn when they're crispy and golden brown,

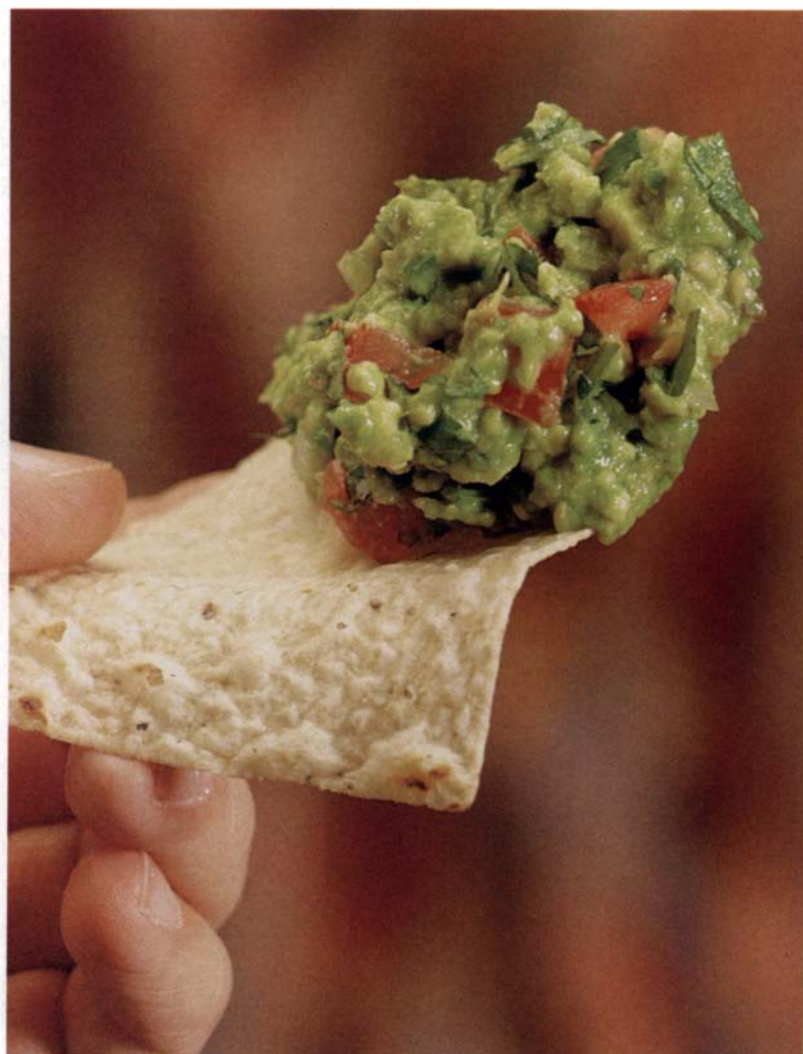


Photo: Eleanor Thompson

about 3 min. Cook the other side until crispy, and remove from the pan with a slotted spatula. Drain on a cooling rack covered with paper towels. Fry the remaining kebabs. They're best served right away, but you can put them in a low oven to keep them warm.

GUACAMOLE WITH CORIANDER

If you've never put coriander in guacamole, try my version. This recipe is easily doubled. Yields almost 2 cups.

½ cup diced tomato
2 Tbs. finely chopped onion
1 green chile, cored, seeded, and chopped fine
2 Tbs. lime juice
1 ripe Haas avocado
2 Tbs. plain yogurt (optional)
½ tsp. cumin seeds, toasted and ground
¼ cup chopped coriander leaves, tightly packed
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Marinate the tomato, onion, and chile in the lime juice while you prepare the avocado. Peel the avocado and mash it in a bowl with a fork until smooth. Stir in the yogurt, if using. Stir in the rest of the ingredients. Let sit for 15 min. for the flavors to blend before serving.

It ain't guacamole without coriander.

Fresh coriander, or cilantro as it's called in Spanish, adds its unmistakable flavor to many Mexican dishes.

Carolyn Haynes became fanatic about fresh coriander as a child when her family lived in India. She works in a refugee assistance program in Philadelphia. ♦

Classic Crème Caramel

A light touch and gentle baking make a silky smooth custard

BY SUSAN McCREIGHT LINDEBORG

My mother made terrific custard. Baked in brown ceramic cups with white glazed interiors, the top sprinkled with nutmeg, it was heavenly. I ate her custard, hot or cold, straight out of the cup. But it wasn't until I was 16 years old while on a trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, that I realized there was more to custard than mom's humble pudding.

It was there, at the historic La Fonda Hotel, that I first tasted *flan*. The menu described *flan* as baked custard, but this *flan* wasn't like anything mom had ever made. Instead of in a cup, it was served on a plate, where it sat quivering in a pool of dark caramel sauce. That first bite slid across my tongue, and I was thrilled by the contrast between the rich eggy custard and the slightly burnt taste of caramel. I had no idea how *flan* was made, but I promised myself then that I'd learn.

In the years since that night at La Fonda, I've made hundreds, probably even thousands of caramel custards, both at home and in restaurant kitchens. In that time I've learned that *flan* is simply the Spanish cousin of the French-born *crème caramel*, but made with sweetened condensed milk rather than whole milk or cream. At heart they are the same, an egg-rich custard baked in a caramel-lined cup, unmolded and served in its own sweet sauce.

In its most basic form, custard is a mixture of a milk product (whole milk, half-and-half, cream, condensed milk, or skim milk), sugar, eggs (with additional yolks sometimes added), and flavorings. Alter the type of milk and the quantity of eggs and egg yolks, and you can change the texture and flavor of the finished custard.

It should be no secret that fat is the key to a

Perfectly cooked crème caramel is silky smooth all the way through. Just firm enough to hold its shape, the custard should quiver when you tap the plate.





An even caramel coating is the goal, but work carefully—it's hot. The caramel will begin to set immediately, so work quickly and always hold the molds with a towel or a hot pad. Hot caramel can cause serious burns.

creamy custard. However, the richest custards, made primarily of cream and egg yolks, are too soft to unmold. Without the proteins particular to egg whites, a custard won't set properly. Baked cream-and-egg-yolk custards remain practically liquid and must be served in their baking molds. They're perfect for *crème brûlée*, with a crisp layer of caramel on top. Custards made with sweetened condensed milk (like my first *flan*) are part of the cuisines of Central America and Southeast Asia. Condensed-milk custards are sweet and have a rich texture similar to those made with heavy cream.

At the other end of the scale, custards made with skim milk and few egg yolks set up and unmold very easily. Their texture is as smooth as any custard made with whole milk and whole eggs, but they don't taste as rich.

In my opinion the best *crème caramel* is made with whole milk and whole eggs with a few extra yolks added for richness. The texture is silky smooth and deliciously rich.

MAKE THE CARAMEL WITH CAUTION

Use a heavy, 1- to 1½-quart saucepan with a flat bottom and a snug-fitting lid to cook the caramel. The characteristics of the pan and lid are important. A level bottom helps the sugar cook evenly, and a heavy pan is less likely to have hot spots, which could allow the sugar to burn. Be sure the lid is tight enough to capture the steam. You want the steam to

condense and wash away any sugar crystals that might cling to the sides of the pan.

Before you start caramelizing the sugar, arrange your molds so they're close at hand. Combine the water and sugar (see recipe below) in a separate mixing bowl, stirring until the sugar is almost dissolved, then pour the mixture directly into the center of the saucepan. This may seem like an unnecessary step, but it will help you avoid getting sugar crystals on the sides of the pan, where they may not dissolve. A single undissolved sugar crystal can start a chain reaction, promoting the formation of others until the entire caramel mixture becomes grainy.

Bring the sugar water to a boil and, as an extra precaution, dip a small (1- to 1½-inch) pastry brush in cold water and brush around the inside of the pan. Cover the pan and boil 1 minute to make sure no sugar crystals remain. Do not stir. Uncover and continue boiling until the sugar begins to color. Gently swirl the pan over the heat until the caramel is medium-dark brown. A light-colored caramel hasn't enough flavor, and a really dark caramel tastes burned. Once the sugar starts caramelizing, watch it closely so that you can stop it at the just the right moment. Sugar starts to color at 310°F; at 338° it starts to burn; and it will be completely black at 350°. The total cooking time is about 10 to 15 minutes.

Pay attention: it's hot and sets quickly. Don't

let yourself get distracted when making caramel. Hot sugar can cause serious burns. Once the color is right, quickly pour the caramel into the molds, dividing it as evenly as possible. Ceramic molds can be individual size, or large enough for an entire recipe of custard. I prefer flat-bottom molds with straight sides. They produce a good-looking *crème caramel*, and they unmold more easily than molds with smaller bottoms and sloping sides.

As you pour the caramel into the molds, you'll notice that the caramel in the last mold filled will be darker than that in the first. That's because the sugar continues to cook from the residual heat in the pan. You want to work quickly, so the caramel won't overcook before you

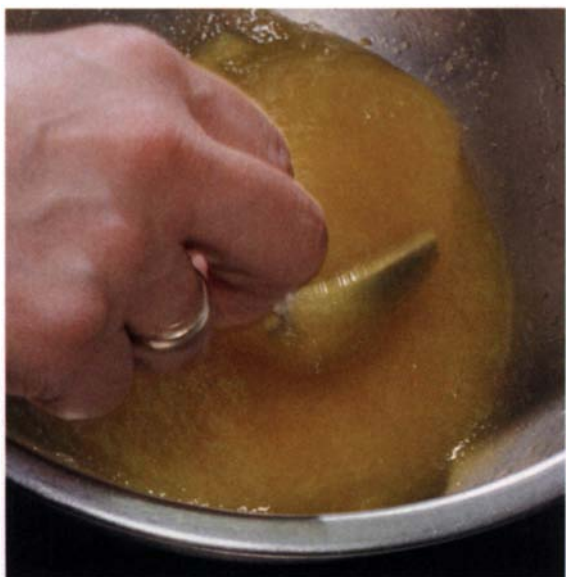
get it into the molds. Once you've poured all the caramel, pick up each mold and tilt it so that the caramel covers the bottom evenly and starts to run up the sides. Use a hot pad or towel to hold the molds—they will be hot. If the caramel is too light or too dark, soak the molds to remove the caramel and make a new batch. You haven't lost anything at this point, and the experience will help you find the right

CREME CARAMEL

CARAMEL:
½ cup water
¾ cup sugar

BASIC CUSTARD:
Yields 3 cups custard
(enough for eight
½-cup molds or
one 1-quart mold).

2⅓ cups whole milk
3 whole eggs
3 egg yolks
½ cup sugar
2 tsp. vanilla extract
(or ½ vanilla bean,
split and scraped)
Pinch of salt



***Stir, don't whisk, the custard base.** Use a regular spoon to mix the sugar, eggs, and milk to avoid beating in air bubbles that can ruin the custard's texture.*

color. (See *Fine Cooking* #1, pp. 35–39, for more information on making caramel.)

STIR GENTLY, BAKE GENTLY

To make the custard, heat the milk until it just barely simmers; boiling milk can curdle the eggs. While the milk is heating, gently combine the eggs, sugar, vanilla extract, and salt in a bowl. Use a small spoon—not a whisk—to mix the eggs. You want just to combine the ingredients without beating in any air that can leave bubbles in your custard. Slowly pour the heated milk into the egg mixture without splashing, stirring gently all the while.

Pour the custard through a fine sieve into the caramel-lined molds, filling to just below the rim. The sieve will remove any undissolved sugar and egg particles and ensure the smoothest possible custard. Let the custard base sit in the molds undisturbed for about five minutes to allow any bubbles to collapse. With the tip of a small knife, gently deflate any remaining bubbles clinging to the edge of the molds.

Heat the oven to 300°. Cooking the egg-rich custards at a relatively low temperature helps prevent curdling. Set the filled molds in a flat, shallow pan, not more than ½ to 1 inch deeper than your molds, to use as a water bath. Pour hot tap water into the pan until it reaches ½ to ¾ of the way up the sides of the molds. Cover the pan with aluminum foil to keep the tops of the custards from forming a skin, but take care that the foil doesn't actually touch the custards.

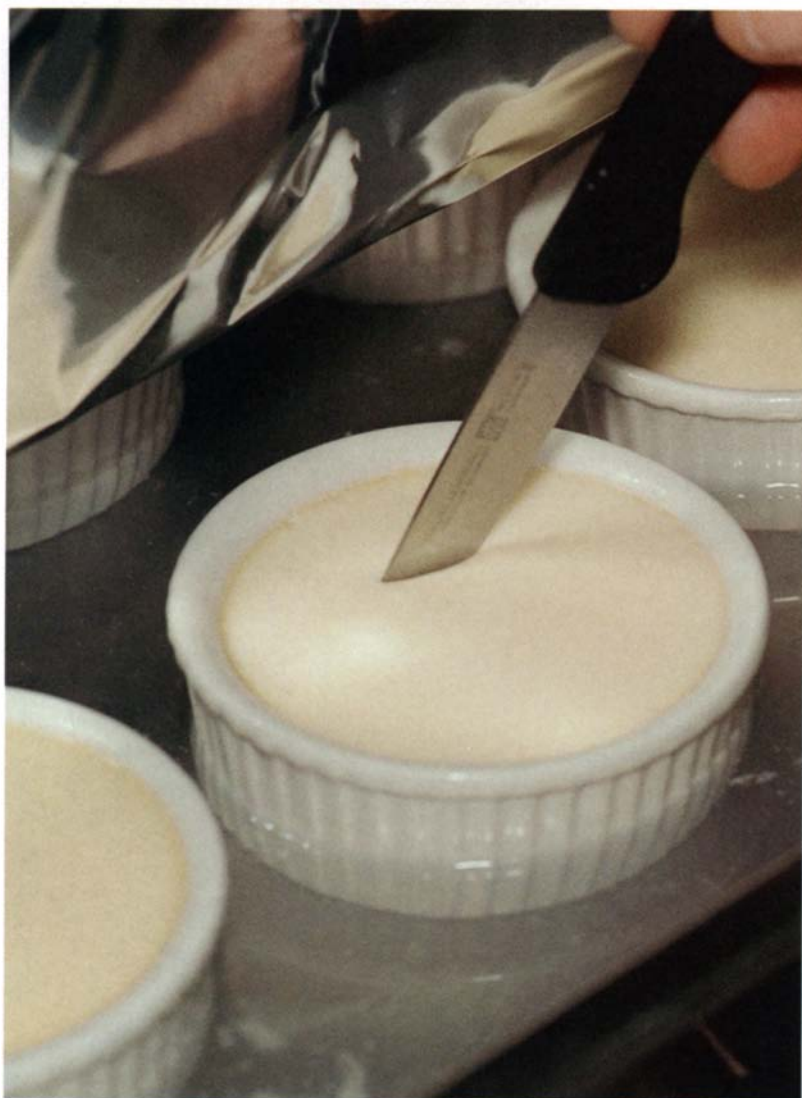
Cooking time depends on the size and thickness of the molds. Large molds need more time than small ones, and thick-walled molds take longer than thin ones. Delicate ½-cup molds cook in 25 to 30 minutes; thick-walled ½-cup molds need 40 to



***Straining the custard directly into the molds is added insurance** that your custard will be smooth and creamy.*



Pop the bubbles for the smoothest custards. Use the tip of a paring knife.



Test for doneness towards the edge of the mold, not in the center. The custards should still be slightly liquid in the center when you take them from the oven. They'll finish cooking as they cool.

50 minutes. Experience will teach you how long it takes to bake custards in your particular molds, and in your oven.

Be careful not to overcook your custards. Once their soft texture has been ruined, there's no way to get it back. Slow cooking and cooling gives you the best chance of achieving quiveringly perfect *crème caramel*.

Testing for texture. To test for doneness, slip a paring knife into the custard halfway between the edge of the mold and the center. If the knife comes out clean, the custard is ready to come out of the oven. The center should still be slightly liquid. Remove the water bath from the oven and loosen the foil to vent the steam, but keep the custards covered. Leave them in the water bath to cool at room temperature. The custards will finish cooking as they cool.

If your knife comes out completely clean from the center of the mold (rather than halfway between the center and the edge) and the custard seems fairly solid, then the custard is already fully cooked and should be cooled quickly on a rack. Air cooling is faster than cooling in the water bath and will minimize further cooking. Overcooked custards begin to puff after they set and will form a skin even if covered.

When the custards reach room temperature, cover them tightly with plastic wrap (again to prevent a skin from forming) and refrigerate them for at least 24 hours. This resting period allows the custards to set completely and for the caramel to melt, making unmolding easier.

Just before serving, remove the molds from the refrigerator. Carefully run your thinnest paring knife around the edge of the mold to loosen the custard. Keep the knife blade flat against the side of the mold. Cutting into the custard will result in ragged edges and leave pieces of custard floating in the sauce. Tap the mold with the heel of your hand to finish loosening the custard. If you see caramel sauce between the custard and the side of the mold, you know your custard is loose.

Invert a serving plate on top of the mold, and turn the whole thing upside down. The custard should release itself. If suction prevents the custard from releasing, gently tap on the bottom of the mold or gently hit the heel of your hand against the side of the mold. Be sure to let all the melted caramel drizzle from the mold over the custard.

Look closely at the texture of the custard and take mental notes for fine-tuning your technique. The custard should be perfectly smooth with very few air bubbles. Gently hit the heel of your hand against the serving plate. The custard should quiver—the sign of a silky, smooth texture. A custard that's underdone will break in the unmolding or won't hold its shape

Variations on *crème caramel*

Make coffee-flavored *crème caramel*, like the one pictured below, by dissolving instant espresso in the milk. To make citrus- or ginger-flavored custard, heat the milk to just below a simmer, add the flavoring, and remove from the heat. Cover the pot and let the milk steep for about 30 minutes. Gently reheat the milk to a slow simmer before combining it with the eggs and sugar.

CITRUS

Zest of 1 large orange and zest of 2 lemons. Reduce vanilla extract to ½ tsp.

GINGER

2 Tbs. grated fresh ginger. Reduce vanilla extract to ½ tsp.

COFFEE

2 Tbs. instant espresso granules. Reduce vanilla extract to 1 tsp. Add 2 Tbs. coffee-flavored liqueur (I prefer Tia Maria) to the egg-sugar mixture.



Photo: Ellen Silverman

on the plate. An overdone custard will barely wiggle, even when the plate is hit hard.

To develop your technique, make *crème caramel* and its variations your specialty for several months. Each batch will teach you something new about the amazing egg and its ability to turn sugar and milk and a bit of flavoring into a truly perfect dessert.

Susan McCreight Lindeborg started her cooking career in pursuit of the perfect flan by cooking at La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe. Later positions include chef at L'Etoile in Madison, Wisconsin, and pastry chef under Bob Kinhead at Twenty-One Federal in Washington, DC. She is now the chef at the Morrison-Clark Inn, a small, historic hotel in Washington, DC. ♦



Mayonnaise

Homemade mayonnaise is a great way to boost the flavor of any recipe that calls for a cold, creamy sauce. The technique is easy to master and, once you have the hang of it, you can get creative with flavorings.

Mayonnaise is the broad name for a family of classic sauces made by binding oil and another liquid together with egg yolks. The liquid is usually lemon juice or vinegar. Egg yolks are used to stabilize the emulsion and to keep the sauce from separating. Fresh eggs are essential in this preparation, as they lose their ability to stabilize the emulsion as they age. Mustard can help with the emulsion, but it will also contribute its own spicy notes to the mayonnaise.

Choose a neutral, clean-tasting oil for basic mayonnaise: refined peanut, canola, and safflower oils all work well. For a more interesting flavor, substitute

Homemade mayonnaise is easy—and so much better than store-bought. From the top, Basic Mayonnaise, Rouille, and Ginger, Lime & Cilantro Mayonnaise (recipes on p. 78).

a stronger oil for the last few spoonfuls. Walnut, hazelnut, toasted sesame seed, and extra-virgin olive oils are wonderful accent oils. These strongly flavored oils can also be used in larger proportions, but they create very forceful mayonnaise.

SLOW AND STEADY

Making mayonnaise with a thin wire whisk in a nonreactive bowl is the simplest method and the best one for small quantities. Whisking by hand provides the most control and is therefore the most reliable method. An electric mixer works best with a whisk attachment. A food processor is quick but can be diffi-

cult to control: the steel blade tends to overwork the mayonnaise in a matter of seconds, producing a lightly colored, lumpy sauce. The shorter plastic “pastry” blade does less damage, but a food processor should really only be used for large quantities—when whisking by hand isn’t feasible.

To start, lay a dishtowel under your mixing bowl to keep the bowl from spinning away from you during whisking. This will free one hand so that you can pour from a measuring cup while whisking with the other hand.

The key to making mayonnaise successfully is to begin slowly. In a clean bowl, whisk together egg yolks, lemon juice or vinegar, salt, and pepper until frothy and almost double in volume. This initial step requires some energy, but it’s necessary to get the emulsion off to a stable start. Next, while still whisking vigorously, slowly drip the oil

into the yolks. The action of the whisk breaks the oil into thousands of tiny droplets which become suspended throughout the sauce. For this reason, it’s important to whisk efficiently—in a tight, circular motion. The first $\frac{1}{3}$ cup of oil is the most critical and requires the most attention.

Once the yolks start to absorb the oil, you may add it in a light, steady stream. The sauce will become noticeably thicker. As more oil is incorporated, the sauce continues to thicken; adding any more lemon juice or vinegar will make it thinner. If you see a puddle of oil forming, stop adding oil and whisk the mayonnaise until all the droplets are worked into the yolks. The goal is to work up the emulsion smoothly, so that the oil is incorporated at the same rate it’s added.

Learning to avoid “breaking” emulsions and to repair those that have broken will come with some practice. An indication that the emulsion is about to break (separate) is when the mayonnaise becomes so thick that it begins to clump up in the whisk. If this happens, stop adding oil and stir in a few spoonfuls of warm water or lemon juice to thin the mixture before you continue to add oil. If the mayonnaise separates completely, put a fresh yolk or a tablespoon of mustard (or both) into a clean bowl and begin whisking again with this as the base. Slowly add the broken sauce as if it were the oil. This will recreate a stable emulsion.

GETTING CREATIVE WITH FLAVORS

Seasoning a basic mayonnaise offers a lot of room for improvisation. The bit of acid you add to the yolks at the beginning is a good place to start. Fresh lemon juice is superior to bottled, and a good-quality white-wine vinegar adds a lot of character. Add up to a tablespoon of these acids for each egg yolk for a sharper flavor that will help cut the richness of the eggs and oil. Any mayonnaise should be adjusted for salt and pepper when finished. (You might want to try ground white pepper, which won’t leave specks.)

A classic flavor variation combines basic mayonnaise with fresh herbs, capers, and cornichons in *rémoulade*, an

(Continued on p. 78)

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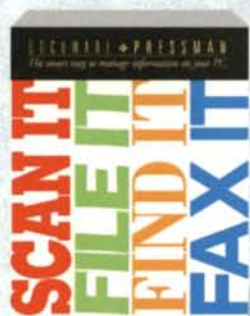
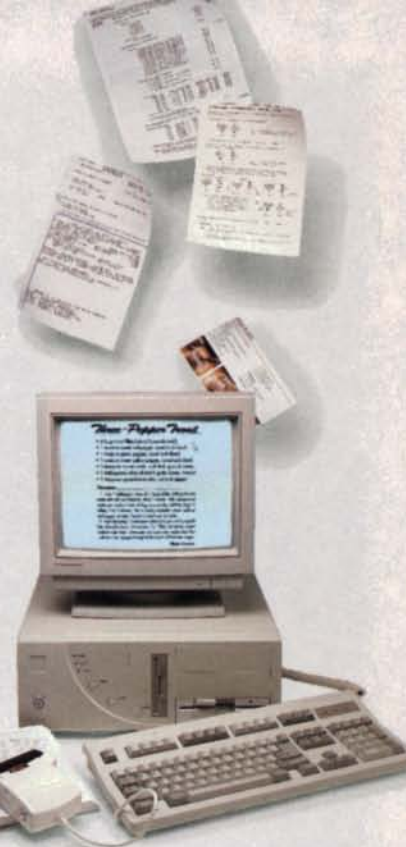
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excellent accompaniment to salads and cold meats. Other possibilities include horseradish, fresh herbs, curry powder, shallots, tomatoes, or fresh chiles.

MAKE IT FRESH

To lessen the risks associated with raw eggs, be sure to use eggs that have been kept cold. Once your mayonnaise is made, store it properly. Homemade mayonnaise should be covered and refrigerated immediately after preparation and only kept for one to two days in the coldest spot in your refrigerator. The mayonnaise begins to lose its silkiness when refrigerated overnight, so it's best used right away. Many recipes recommend making mayonnaise with room-temperature eggs because it's difficult to create an emulsion when the ingredients are cold. This isn't really necessary as long as your equipment and oil are not cold.

BASIC MAYONNAISE

Some chefs prefer to use more oil to produce a lighter colored and slightly thicker sauce. The proportions may be modified to include as much as $\frac{3}{4}$ cup oil per large yolk but beyond that, the sauce will break. *Yields about 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups.*

2 large egg yolks
1 tsp. fresh lemon juice or white-wine vinegar
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. Dijon mustard (optional)
1 cup oil
Salt and freshly ground white pepper

Whisk the yolks, lemon juice, and mustard together until frothy. Slowly incorporate the oil one drop at a time. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

ROUILLE

This classic mayonnaise is traditionally spread on toasted bread and served with bouillabaisse, but it's also great with simple boiled potatoes. *Rouille* (pronounced roo-EE) actually means rust, which aptly describes its color. *Yields about 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups.*

1 red bell pepper, roasted, peeled, cored, and seeded
2 large egg yolks
1 tsp. fresh lemon juice
Salt to taste
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup vegetable oil
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup extra-virgin olive oil
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. tomato paste
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. Tabasco (or other red-pepper sauce)

Purée the roasted pepper and cook it in a non-stick pan over medium heat for 3 to 5 min., until it's nearly dry. Stir frequently to prevent scorching. Set the pepper purée aside to cool while you make the mayonnaise.

Whisk the egg yolks, lemon juice, and salt together until frothy. Slowly incorporate the

vegetable oil and then the olive oil. Combine the mayonnaise with the tomato paste, Tabasco, and pepper purée. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

GINGER, LIME & CILANTRO MAYONNAISE

The fresh ginger juice in this recipe gives this mayonnaise a slightly sweet taste and a little bit of bite. This mayonnaise has lots of flavor and adds a decidedly tropical touch to simply grilled boneless chicken breasts. *Yields about 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups.*

2 large egg yolks
1 Tbs. fresh lime juice
Salt and freshly ground white pepper
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup peanut oil
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. dark Asian sesame oil
4 oz. fresh ginger
3 Tbs. finely chopped cilantro

Whisk the yolks together with the lime juice, salt, and pepper. Slowly incorporate the peanut oil and then the sesame oil.

Peel the ginger and grate it fine using either a food processor or the large face of a box grater. Squeeze out the ginger's juice (you should get about 2 Tbs.) and add it to the mayonnaise. Add the cilantro, taste, and adjust the seasoning.

—Molly Stevens, a chef/instructor at the New England Culinary Institute, Essex, Vermont

Making Breadcrumbs and Croutons



Every salad deserves a few crunchy croutons.

Even bread-lovers occasionally find themselves with a few slices of bread from the bread machine, a quarter of a baguette, or a couple of rolls left over at the end of a meal. It's a shame to throw away good

bread, but what can you do with these leftovers? The easy and smart answer is to make breadcrumbs or croutons.

DRY BREADCRUMBS

Use your food processor to make dry breadcrumbs. Leave the leftover bread in an uncovered container until it has completely dried. (Keeping the bread uncovered will prevent it from becoming moldy and unusable.) Before grinding the bread into crumbs, check that it's completely dry. Bread that's brittle on the outside with a soft spot in the center may cause the blade of your food processor to jam—a good way to burn out the motor. Breaking the bread into smaller pieces before grinding is also a good idea.

Put the pieces of dried bread into the work bowl of the food processor and grind it into even crumbs. A steel blade will produce coarse crumbs, while the grating blade will yield fairly fine crumbs. If you prefer very fine breadcrumbs, grate the bread first and then pass the crumbs through a colander. If you don't have a food processor, a box grater will work, though this method is obviously a bit slower. Store your dry crumbs in an airtight plastic container or zip-lock bag. They should stay fresh up to two weeks.

Dry breadcrumbs are perfect for recipes such as casseroles or broiled fish, where a crisp, brown crust will seal in juices. Adding some chopped herbs or grated lemon zest to dry breadcrumbs makes a perfect coating for sautéed chicken breasts. Dry breadcrumbs, however, are not for every recipe.

FRESH BREADCRUMBS

Fresh breadcrumbs are great for lighter coatings and softer crusts, such as the classic coating for roasted rack of lamb (see p. 44). These breadcrumbs are supposed to be somewhat moist, so you don't have to wait too long for the bread to dry. But beware of bread that's too soft—it tends to clump into balls instead of separating into crumbs. Let the bread become slightly stale before loading it into your food processor. If the bread has a thick crust, remove it before grating so that the crumbs stay uniform in size and flavor. Like dry crumbs, fresh crumbs are a perfect carrier for fresh herbs, citrus zest, and other seasonings. Fresh crumbs should be used

the same day you make them; otherwise, they turn into dry breadcrumbs.

CROUTONS FOR SOUPS AND SALADS

There is no comparison between fresh croutons and those that you buy in a box. Good, homemade croutons, which are almost as easy to make as breadcrumbs, can add immeasurably to soups and salads.

Simply cut the bread into cubes or rounds (see photo at right); you can also stamp out a round using a pastry cutter. The size and shape of the croutons depends on how you plan to use them. Rustic cubes are perfect for Caesar salad, while small and precise croutons can garnish an elegant soup. Three-inch rounds are great for heartier soups. Pour the soup on top of the crouton, so it softens and thickens the soup, or float the toasted round on the soup's surface. Just remember to make the croutons a uniform size and shape; otherwise they won't cook evenly.

Toss or brush the bread with a bit of melted butter or olive oil, and season with



Croutons for soup. Large, round croutons like these are cut from slices of leftover bread, brushed with olive oil, seasoned, and toasted until golden.

salt and pepper. Sprinkle with chopped garlic and herbs if you want more flavor, or toss them with some grated Parmesan.

Spread the cubes on a baking sheet in a single layer. Bake in a 350°F oven until golden brown, about 15 minutes. Keep an eye on them: they burn easily. If you've cut larger croutons, you'll probably want

to give them a flip halfway through baking so they'll brown on all sides. Use the croutons right away, or cool them thoroughly and then store them in an airtight container for up to three days.

—Jeffrey Peppet, co-owner of Truffles, a gourmet shop in Marblehead, Massachusetts ♦

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An Inside Look at Hard-Boiled Eggs

BY SHIRLEY O. CORRIHER



Green eggs are overcooked. Older eggs are more liable to turn green, but won't if their cooking time is carefully monitored.



Centered yolks look prettier. To move the yolks toward the center of the eggs, store them on their side overnight before cooking them.

Boiling an egg is easy—about as easy as boiling water, right? Wrong. Simple as it seems, there's a lot going on inside that blank little oval. Depending on the age of the egg, how it has been stored, and how you cook it, your hard-boiled egg can be rubbery, difficult to peel, lopsided, and green-yolked, or it can be a thing of beauty—a moist, tender white with a centered, golden-yellow yolk.

GETTING THE TEXTURE RIGHT

When you heat an egg, the coiled proteins in both the white and the yolk unwind and begin to move around. Almost immediately, the unwound proteins bump into each other and bond together. There's no longer room for light to travel between

these bonded (or coagulated) proteins, and so the egg white turns from clear to opaque. The bonding proteins trap the water in the egg, making it moist and tender. If you continue to heat the egg, or heat it too vigorously, the bonds between the proteins tighten, squeezing out the water and leaving you with a rubbery egg.

The key to making tender hard-boiled eggs then is to heat them gently just to the point where the proteins bond firmly but don't squeeze out the trapped water. You can do this by putting the eggs in boiling water and then turning the heat down to a low simmer, but there are two drawbacks to this method. First, to keep the shells from cracking, you have to warm refrigerated eggs to at least room temperature before you put them in the boiling water. Otherwise, the cold air in the shell expands the instant the eggs hit the boiling water, cracking open the shells. Second, it's all too easy to crack the shells when lowering the eggs into boiling water. If they

fall even a short distance to the bottom of the pan, they may crack.

A better way is to cover the eggs with at least an inch of lukewarm tap water, bring the water to a boil, and then remove them from the heat. Let large eggs cook gently in the hot water for 15 minutes; extra-large eggs need 18 minutes. Stop the cooking by pouring off the hot water and rinsing the eggs with cold running water for 5 minutes. With this method, you don't have to warm the eggs before cooking them, and there's less chance of the shells cracking. This is the method that the American Egg Board recommends, and I've found that it works very well. In fact, egg experts prefer the term *hard-cooked*, since the point of this method is to avoid boiling them.

OLDER EGGS ARE EASIER TO PEEL

After I've cooled the eggs and poured off all the water, I shake the pan vigorously to bang the cooked eggs against each other and against the sides of the pan, cracking the shells all over. Then I rub them under running water to peel them. Sometimes the shells come right off, but sometimes it's really difficult to separate the shells from the egg white. Instead of good-looking, smooth eggs, I'm left with pitted whites—fine for egg salad but not for deviled eggs. Why does this happen?

The egg's pH determines how tightly the membranes between the egg white and the shell are bonded together. The more alkaline the egg is, the easier the membranes separate and the easier the egg is to peel. When an egg is first laid, it is slightly alkaline. As it ages, carbon dioxide seeps out through pores in the shell, leaving the egg more and more alkaline. Eggs that are more than ten days old should peel easily.

Researchers have verified that it is alkalinity alone, and not some other change that comes with age, that determines how difficult it is to peel an egg. (Yes, there really are hard-boiled-egg researchers.) They placed difficult-to-peel fresh eggs in a sealed container and exposed them to fumes from lye, a strong alkali. These eggs, when hard-boiled, peeled easily. The researchers then did the reverse and placed easy-to-peel older eggs in a sealed container and exposed them to hydrochloric acid fumes. These acidic eggs would not peel easily when hard-boiled.

GREEN YOLKS COME WITH AGE AND OVERCOOKING

Older eggs are easier to peel, but they're more prone to developing a greenish-gray layer on the surface of the yolks. This ugly discoloration results when sulfur in the white combines with iron in the yolk to form green iron sulfide. Higher acid levels in the egg prevent this reaction. Since older eggs are less acidic (more alkaline), they're more susceptible to discoloration.

Heat is the other factor in creating greenish yolks. The longer eggs are heated,

the greater the opportunity for these two chemicals to combine. But if you only let the eggs stand in hot water for 15 minutes and then rinse them in cold water to stop the cooking, there shouldn't be any discoloration, even with older eggs.

If your yolks do have a green coating on them, you can repair some of the damage with an acidic sauce. Acids react with this green iron sulfide, changing it back to a more appealing color. Mixing badly discolored yolks with acidic ingredients, like mayonnaise with a little extra lemon juice, will greatly reduce the green.

ECCENTRIC EGG YOLKS

Deviled eggs or sliced eggs are more appealing if the yolks are centered and surrounded by an even band of egg white. An egg has built-in shock cords that hold the yolk safely in the center of the egg. Called chalazae, these are the string-like pieces that cling to the yolk when you separate an egg. They attach the yolk to each end of the egg, holding it in place. Fresh eggs have strong chalazae, which keep the yolks centered; however these weaken with age. Very fresh eggs with well-centered yolks are, however, very difficult to peel. So here are two tricks you can use on older eggs to better center their yolks.

The first way to get the yolks towards the center of the eggs is to cook the eggs in an upright position. You used to be able to find wire racks to hold eggs upright in cookware specialty shops, but lately I've only seen them at tag sales. To get the same effect, use a small saucepan that snugly holds eight eggs standing on end. To load them, prop the pan up at a slant and stack the eggs, starting at the lower side, until they're all packed in. Cover the eggs with water and cook them as described above.

An easier way is to store the eggs on their sides (rather than upright) for a day before hard-boiling them. Tape the carton closed so that it can't open accidentally and stow the carton on its side in the refrigerator overnight. Most of the yolks migrate back to the center this way.

PATCHING CRACKS

Every egg has an air pocket in its larger end. As the egg ages, it breathes; that is, it lets off carbon dioxide and moisture through its pores and takes in air. As the egg breathes, the air pocket grows. This air

pocket expands as the egg is heated and can cause the shell to crack. Some people recommend piercing a tiny hole in the shell to permit the air to escape as the egg cooks, but this seems to encourage rather than prevent cracking.

Inevitably some eggs will crack. Adding salt to the cooking water will quickly coagulate the proteins in the egg to seal the crack and keep the egg white from feathering all through the water. A teaspoon of salt for up to two dozen eggs is plenty. Putting vinegar in the water would also speed up coagulation, but the acid will also make the eggs more difficult to peel.

STORING HARD-BOILED EGGS

After eggs are hard-boiled, they usually keep well for up to two weeks in the refrigerator. Store them in the shell in their carton to prevent them from getting banged around and also to protect them from refrigerator odors. If a peeled egg appears slimy, pink, or has a strong smell, discard it immediately.

Shirley O. Corriher, of Atlanta, Georgia, teaches food science and cooking classes around the country. She is a contributing editor to Fine Cooking. ♦

How fresh are your eggs?

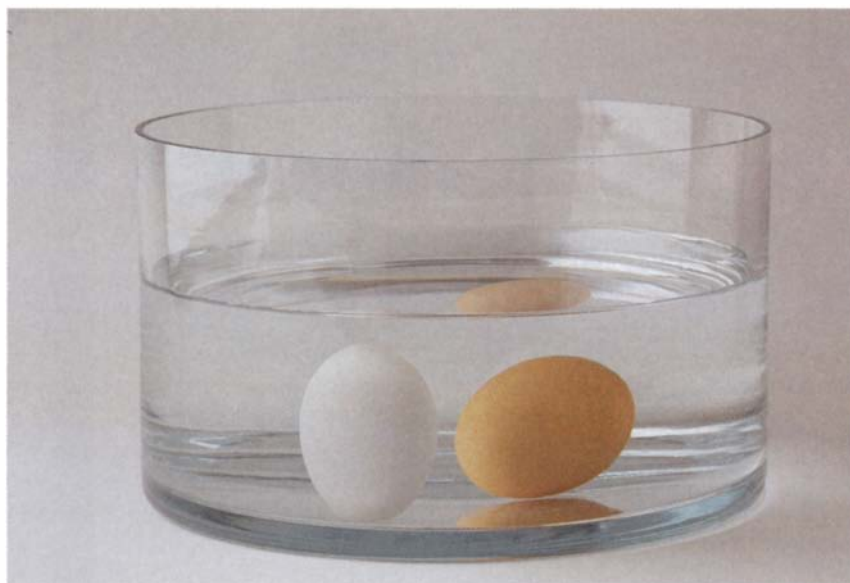
All cartons coming from a USDA-inspected plant are stamped with the Julian date of when the eggs were packed, which is usually within a day or two of when they were laid. (Julian dates start with 1 on January 1 and end with 365 on December 31.) Most cartons also have an expiration date, which can be no more than 30 days after the pack date.

Eggs usually don't spoil as they age—they dry up instead. Over time, moisture and carbon dioxide seep out through pores in the shell, leaving behind an air sack that grows in size. Temperature and humidity determine how quickly the air pocket grows. An egg left uncovered in a

dry, warm room can change as much in one day as an egg properly stored in its carton in the refrigerator changes a week. A frost-free refrigerator dries eggs faster than one that isn't frost-free.

SCIENCE PROJECT

To find out how big an egg's air pocket is, place an egg in a clear glass bowl of water. If it lies flat on the bottom (like the brown egg below), it has a relatively small air sack and is quite fresh. If the egg stands up on the bottom of the bowl (like the white one), it has a larger air sack and is older. If it bobs off the bottom, it's older still. If it floats, watch out.



Here we show off the work of cooks who are good at showing off their food. The featured cook selects a few signature dishes and explains how each one is assembled and presented.

Fanciful Finales

BY DAN BUDD



Lemon Raspberry Flatbed Tart.

Several elements go into this dessert, each one good on its own, but together they make a dish that's not just fun to look at but is truly delicious as well. I never let the look of my desserts become the most important thing—flavor and freshness are always the top priority. But I do like to serve desserts that make people smile.

The flatbed of the truck is made of shortbread, raspberry jam, fresh raspberries, and lemon-flavored Swiss meringue. The “tanks” on top are piped rows of lemon curd that has a lot of body because I’ve cooked it as much as possible without ruining the texture, and I’ve mounted it with a lot of butter. The cab of the truck is made from a honey-crisp cookie shaped by brushing the batter through a stencil onto a nonstick baking pan. A little chocolate smokestack finishes the look.



Linzertorte. This take on a classic linzertorte doesn't depict a particular scene, but its lofty structure and pretty colors make it a whimsical dessert. The linzer cookie is made from a pecan and cinnamon dough. Raspberry in three forms—jam, fresh berries, and sorbet—tops the cookie, and a tiny cinnamon shortbread ring loops through crisp, airy cigarettes of raspberry meringue. Drops of raspberry sauce and caramel circle the cookie.

Opera in the Park. This very “New York” dessert has a base of classic *gâteau opéra*—a French cake made from thin layers of almond sponge cake soaked with coffee, alternating with chocolate and coffee buttercream, and glazed with chocolate. The park bench that sits on top was made entirely from tempered chocolate, by piping the supports, cutting the slats, and “building” it with melted tempered chocolate.

The lamppost has a base of very fudgy flourless chocolate cake, with a column made from a long chocolate cigarette. A white chocolate truffle that's filled with white chocolate mousse makes up the globe.

A drizzle of *crème anglaise* and a sprinkle of espresso granules make the “bird feed” for the pigeons, which are sprayed on with a paint sprayer through a stencil using a chocolate and cocoa butter paint.

Dan Budd is the executive pastry chef of Park Avenue Café, New York City and Chicago. ♦

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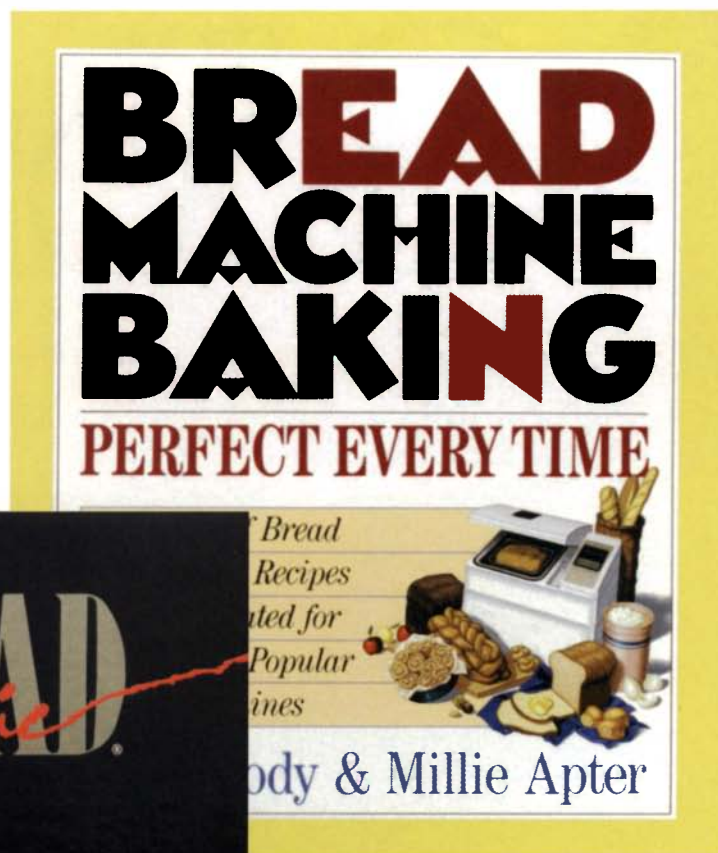
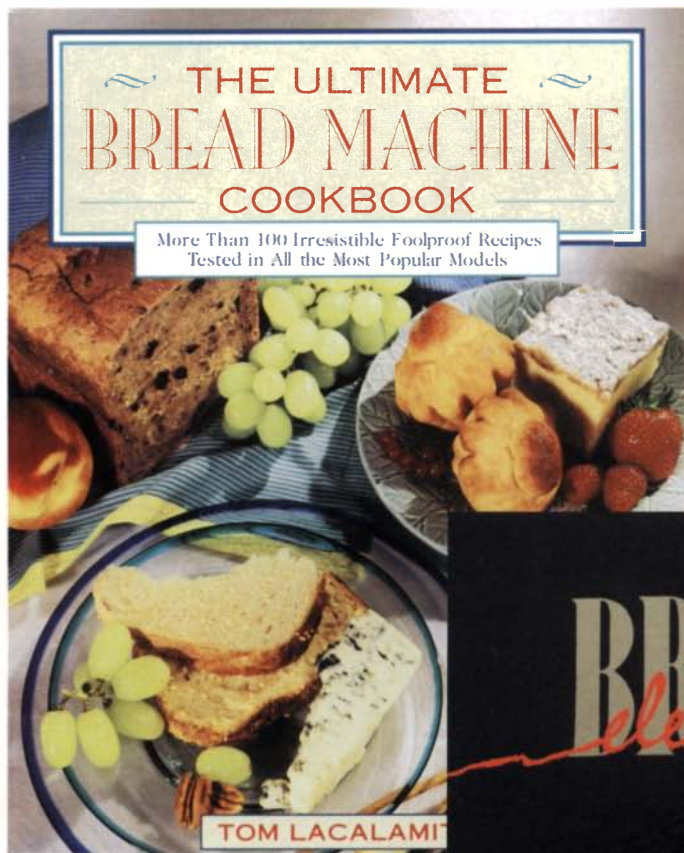
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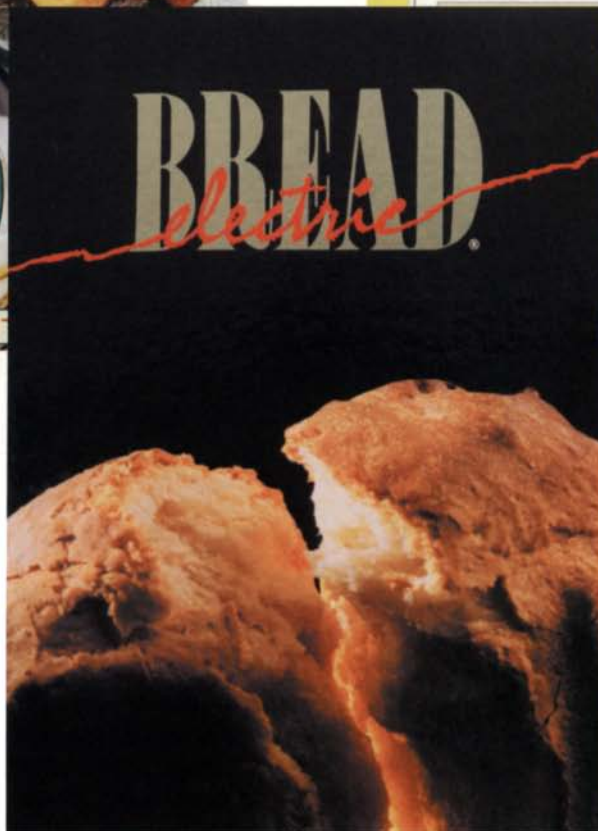
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Bread-Machine Cookbooks



When bread machines were introduced in the United States around 1987, I wrote them off as a temporary fad. Eight years and several million units later, I've had to rethink my position. Now that I've used a bread machine, I understand their appeal. Just put in the ingredients, press a button, and soon the smell of baking bread fills the house. A few hours later, there's a fresh loaf that's ready to eat.

Bread-machine baking demands precise measurements. A tablespoon more or less liquid can make the difference between a tender, high-rising loaf and a leaden doorstep. Also, bread machines vary—not every recipe yields the same result in every machine. Instruction manuals are invariably limited, offering little more than basic directions and a



handful of recipes. Consequently, bread machine cookbooks have proliferated. There are now over thirty such books, all published since 1991. I've tested recipes from many of them. The following three books are the ones I like best.

***The Ultimate Bread Machine Cookbook*, by Tom Lacalamita.** SIMON & SCHUSTER, 1993. \$25, HARDCOVER; 207 pp. ISBN 0-671-88023-3.

A former marketing manager for small electronics at Welbilt, Tom Lacalamita helped develop bread machines for that company, and he knows the machines very well. The first section of his book, titled "Bread Automatically," includes 41 recipes for breads made from beginning to end in the machine. Among these are basic loaves, like Rye Bread and Cinnamon Raisin Bread, as well as more unusual offerings, like crunchy Golden Cracked-Wheat Bread and a cozy Honey Graham Granola Bread.

The second part of the book, "Hand-Shaped Delights," contains recipes for doughs that are made in the machine, and then shaped by hand and baked in a conventional oven. Brioche, Egg Bagels, and Fresh Herb Focaccia are some of the 62 breads in this section.

The recipes are appealing both for their creativity and their simplicity. Few call for hard-to-find ingredients. Lacalamita's recipes were tested on ten different models, so they work on many

types of machines, but I find his recipe format confusing and difficult to use. With ingredients listed in the center of the page and measurements for different size loaves to the left and right of the ingredient list, it's too easy to mix up the sets of measurements. Nutritional information is included with each recipe, and there are 32 pages of color photographs.

Bread Machine Baking—Perfect Every Time, by Lora Brody & Millie Apter. WILLIAM MORROW, 1993. \$20, SPIRAL-BOUND HARDCOVER; 342 PP. ISBN 0-688-11843-7.

Like most bread-machine users, Lora Brody and her mother, Millie Apter, quickly discovered that not every recipe works with every machine. So for their book, they wrote each recipe in several different versions, each version tailored for a specific machine, including DAK, Panasonic/National (large and small), Hitachi, Sanyo, Maxim, Welbilt (large and small), Regal, and Zojirushi. The ingredients for each version are listed in the order suited to that particular machine, eliminating the need to refer to the machine's manual. As a result, this bread-machine cookbook is the easiest one to use that I've found.

The book is organized by bread type: white, whole wheat, sourdough, vegetable and herb, cheese, fruit, and sweet. Of the 75 recipes, some 18 are for hand-shaped bread, such as Pizza Dough, an excellent rendition made flavorful with olive oil, cornmeal, and whole-wheat flour. While Brody and Apter provide plenty of traditional recipes (Basic Whole Wheat and Russian Black Bread, for instance), the bulk of the recipes are creative and even whimsical. Brody and Apter obviously had fun creating these recipes. Avery-Island Hot Bread is a bright-orange loaf spiked with Tabasco and pepper-flavored vodka. The unusual Sweet-Potato Rye Bread is flavored with lemon, orange, cinnamon, and black pepper. Some recipes are rather elaborate, like the multi-stepped Caramelized Onion Braid, but the authors' instructions are very clear and easy to follow.

Unfortunately, finding the individual recipes isn't so easy. Since there are so many versions of each, a single recipe can go on for several pages. A list in the table of contents would make locating favorites less difficult.

Electric Bread, by the staff of Innovative Cooking Enterprises & Susan Nightingale.

INNOVATIVE COOKING ENTERPRISES, 1993. \$29.95, SPIRAL-BOUND HARDCOVER; 158 PP. ISBN 0-9629831-3-6. (SOFT-COVER, \$19.95.)

Innovative Cooking Enterprises (ICE) has established itself as the ultimate bread-machine tester. First published in 1991, its book, *Electric Bread*, is updated annually and provides a good cross-section of simple and elaborate bread recipes. The company tests all the recipes on most of the machines on the market—its test kitchen now has 80 machines and claims to have baked more than 10,000 loaves. The staff also tests recipes using a variety of flours and yeasts.

I tried recipes from this book on several machines. The delicious Certainly Citrus made with marmalade, lemon, and lime juice, was successful in each machine, but hardly identical. Some machines produced a light, airy loaf, while others turned out a denser loaf

with a finer crumb. Similarly, the recipe for Easy French Bread yielded loaves of varying heights in different machines.

There are 51 recipes, some of which are quite creative. The Sweet Coconut Curry bread is so simple and unusual that it's worth buying a bread machine just to have such a delicious bread on hand all the time. There are also recipes for eight "specialty" breads—meaning those that are baked in an oven—including Calzones. The Honey Bran English Muffins were fine, but the texture is more like a roll than an English muffin. Buttery, pull-apart Orange Kisses are delectable. There is also a section of recipes for bread spreads, such as Green Peppercorn Butter and Gruyère Apple Spread.

This eye-catching book has color photographs on every spread. Each recipe is accompanied by "Success Hints," but aside from a list of ingredients and measurements, no instructions are included—you're meant to follow the instructions that come with your machine. *Electric Bread* also includes a catalog of accessories that ICE carries—yes, advertisements in your cookbook.

—Lisë Stern is the editor of "The Cookbook Review," a bimonthly newsletter published in Cambridge, Massachusetts. ♦

OTHER BREAD-MACHINE BOOKS OF INTEREST:

Best Bread-Machine Cookbook Ever, by Madge Rosenberg. Harper-Collins, 1992. \$15.95, spiral-bound; 224 pp. ISBN 0-06-016927-3.

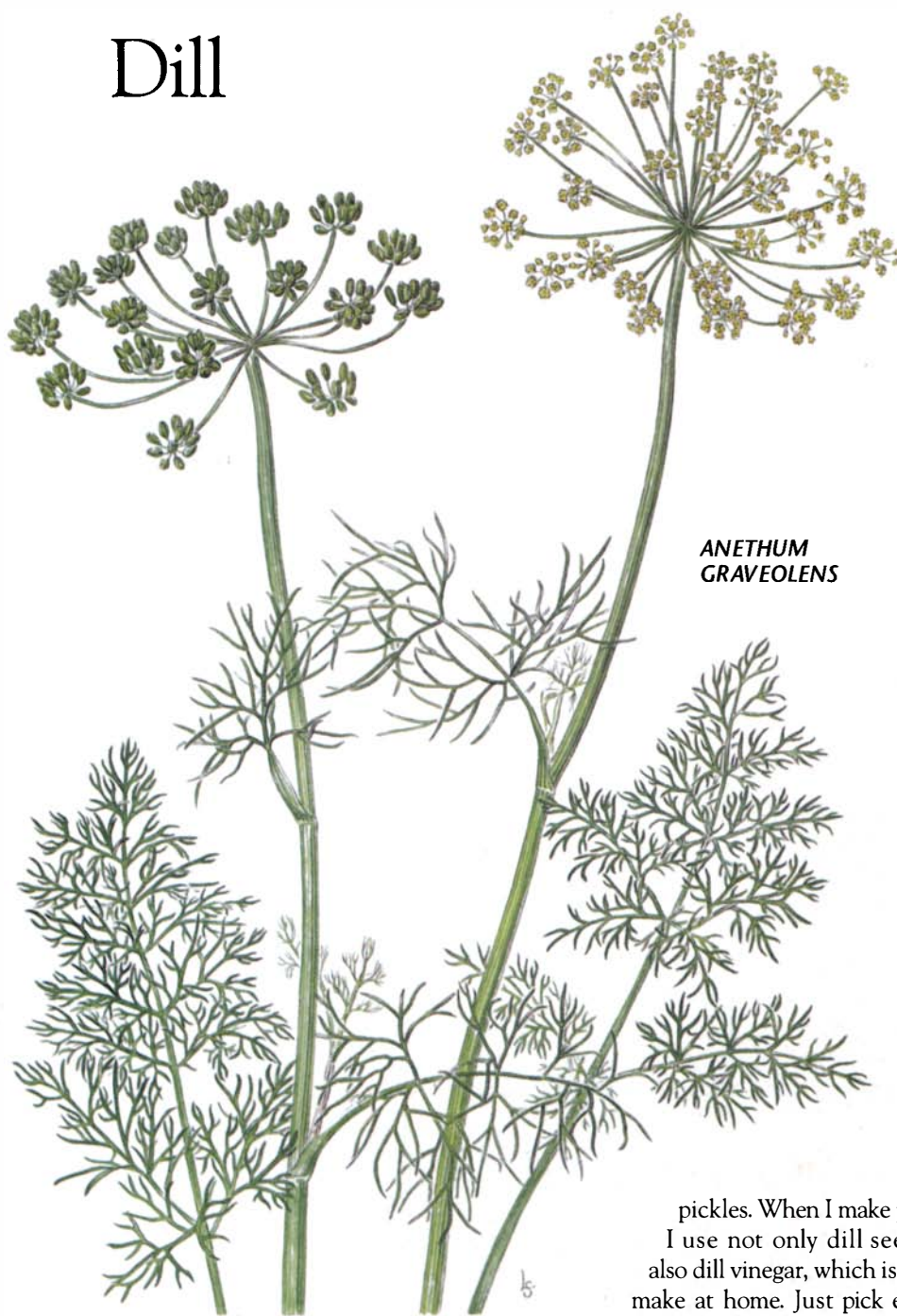
Bread Machine Baking for Better Health, by Maureen B. Keane & Daniella Chace. Prima, 1994. \$12.95, softcover; 236 pp. ISBN 1-55958-419-X.

Desserts from your Bread Machine, by Lora Brody. William Morrow, 1994. \$22, hardcover; 290 pp. ISBN 0-688-13071-2.

Bread Machine Cookbook, Book Five, by Donna Rathmell German. Bristol Publishing Enterprises, 1994. \$8.95, softcover; 172 pp. ISBN 1-558-67093-9.

Bread Machine Magic Book of Helpful Hints, by Linda Rehberg & Lois Conway. St. Martin's Press, 1993. \$10.95, softcover; 224 pp. ISBN 0-312-06914-6.

Dill



**ANETHUM
GRAVEOLENS**

Most herbs are “either/or”—either their seeds are used as a seasoning, or their leaves are. Dill is unusual in that both its seeds and its leaves can be used in cooking. The seeds lend a strong, tangy flavor to pickles, soups, and specialty breads, while the leaves (also used in pickling) contribute a pleasant savor to sauces, salads, potatoes, and fish.

Certainly dill’s most familiar association is with pickles, usually cucumber

pickles. When I make pickles, I use not only dill seed, but also dill vinegar, which is easy to make at home. Just pick enough fresh dill leaves and tender side stalks to loosely fill a one-quart jar. Rinse and pat them dry. Stuff the dill into the jar and cover with vinegar. (Use cider vinegar if you’ll be pickling green beans or cucumbers, but if you plan to pickle cauliflower, use a clear vinegar so as not to darken the white florets.) Cover the jar loosely and set it in a sunnyspot for a week or so, shaking it daily. Strain the vinegar into a clean bottle and seal it.

Fresh dill weed is also used to make gravlax, a Scandinavian delicacy of salmon cured with dill, cracked pepper,

sugar, and salt. When grilling salmon, I often wrap the fillets in aluminum foil with a few sprigs of dill and a little butter. The fish is delectable, and if the packets are opened carefully, there’s a spoonful or so of sauce to go with a side dish of steamed rice or boiled new potatoes. Try a thin white sauce flavored with dill as a delicious alternative to mint sauce for lamb. Keep in mind that heat diminishes dill’s flavor, so add it to hot dishes just before serving.

FROM GARDEN TO TABLE

So companionable an herb belongs in every kitchen—and in every kitchen garden. Although it transplants poorly, dill is easily raised from seed scattered where you want the plants to grow. In the spring, just loosen the soil in a sunny spot, sow the seed, and cover lightly. Germination occurs within a week, and you can begin using snippets and thinnings soon after. Plants mature in about six weeks and can grow as tall as three feet. Make several sowings, at about two-week intervals, to ensure a constant supply of tender, tasty leaves. Once the plants begin to blossom, their leaves yellow with age and are less flavorful. Allow some plants to mature in order to harvest the seed. Some ripe seeds will fall to the ground, to volunteer as self-sown seedlings.

Dill’s fresh flavor fades when dried; freezing is a better way to preserve its taste. Rinse the leaves, pat dry, divide into recipe-sized units, seal in plastic wrap, and freeze until needed. For easy retrieval, staple several packets to a sheet of cardboard and label it. This simplifies their recovery; otherwise, individual packets tend to skitter to the freezer’s nether recesses and disappear.

Where space doesn’t permit the cultivation of the fresh herb, you can purchase it. Young plants with their roots washed free of soil are commonly found in the produce section of most supermarkets. Stand them upright in a jar of water and the leaves will remain fresh for a considerable period. Fortunate is the cook who has dill seed in the cupboard and dill weed in the garden.

Judy Glattstein, a landscape consultant in Wilton, Connecticut, teaches classes on herbs for both garden and kitchen use. ♦

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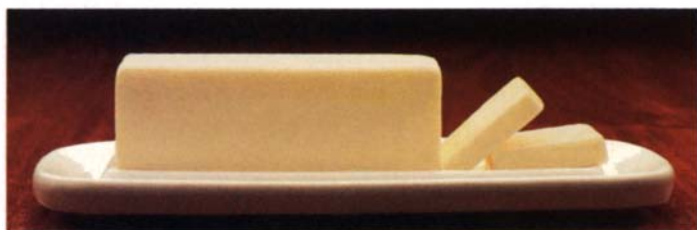
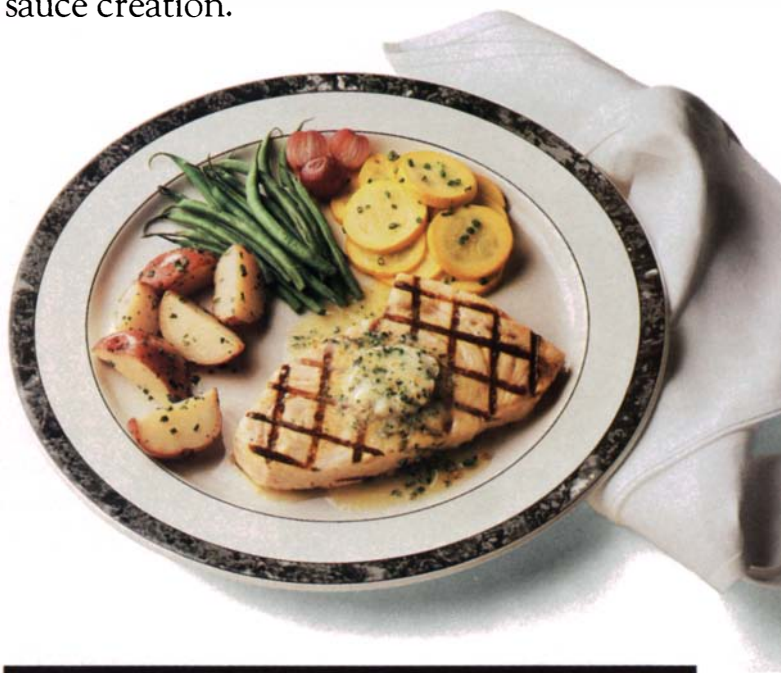
Chef George Morrone, Aqua, San Francisco



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Sponsoring an event that you want readers to know about? Send an announcement to *Calendar*, Fine Cooking, PO Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506. Be sure to include dates, a complete address, and the phone number to call for more information. Listings are free, but restricted to events of direct interest to cooks. We go to press three months before the issue date of the magazine and must be notified well in advance. The deadline for entries in the August/September issue is May 1.

ARIZONA

Cooking Contest—Hava-Salsa Challenge, April 28–29, Windsor State Park Beach, Lake Havasu City. Salsa-mixing contest. Call Jay Lewis at 602/453-3641.

CALIFORNIA

Festival—49th Annual Sebastopol Apple Blossom Festival & Sebastopol Music Festival, April 29–30, Ives Park, Sebastopol. Call 707/823-3032.

Festival—Oxnard Strawberry Festival, May 20–21, College Park, Oxnard. Call 805/385-7578.

Festival—Mushroom Mardi Gras, May 27–28, Morgan Hill. Festival celebrating mushroom varieties grown in South Santa Clara County. Call 408/779-9444.

COLORADO

Triathlon—2nd Annual Chef's Team Triathlon, April 8–10, The Village, Breckenridge. Chef teams compete in a slalom ski race and create foods in "The Image of the Old West." Call Michel Bouit at 312/663-5701.

Festival—The Aspen Food & Wine Magazine Classic, June 16–18, Aspen. Call 800/494-6395.

CONNECTICUT

Festival—41st Windsor Shad Derby, May 20, Town Green, Windsor. For information, call 203/688-5165.

FLORIDA

Festival—5th Annual Florida Winefest & Auction, April 20–23, Sarasota. Vintners and celebrity chefs collaborate on a series of brunches, dinners, wine tastings, seminars, and a wine auction. Call 813/952-1109.

GEORGIA

Festival & Cooking Contest—Miller Genuine Draft Hot & Spicy Food Festival, May 20, Naval Air Station, Marietta. Cooking competition categories include: Mexican, Cajun, hot American, Caribbean, Italian, and international cuisine. Call 404/872-4731.

LOUISIANA

Festival—The Breaux Bridge Crawfish Festival, May 5–7. Call 318/332-6655.

MASSACHUSETTS

Festival—Boston Brewers Festival, May 13, World Trade Center. Public tasting of a wide variety of micro, specialty, and limited-release beers from Canadian and American brewers. For information, call 617/547-6311. To order tickets, call 617/931-2000.

MICHIGAN

Festival—The National Morel Mushroom Festival, May 18–21, Sunset Park, Boyne City. Foraging for wild edibles, National Morel Mushroom Hunting Championship, other events. Call 616/582-6222.

MISSISSIPPI

Festival—World Catfish Festival, April 1, Belzoni. For information, call 800/408-4838.

PENNSYLVANIA

Antiques Show—"The Cook's Fancies," 34th Annual Philadelphia Antiques Show, April 8–12. Antique cooking tools displayed include elaborate molds in copper, ceramics, and wood; unusual cooking

utensils; paintings with culinary themes; rare cookbooks; food sculptures; and more. Call 215/387-3500.

Festival—Rhubarb Festival, May 20, Kitchen Kettle Village, Intercourse. Rhubarb cooking contest, other events. Call 800/732-3538.

SOUTH CAROLINA

Festival—15th Annual Crawfish Festival, April 29, Pawleys Island. Call 803/237-3301.

TENNESSEE

Festival—42nd Annual Cosby Ramp Festival, May 7, Kineaubista Hill, Cosby. Festival celebrating the ramp (a cross between onion and garlic). Includes a breakfast, an afternoon barbecue, music, and other events. Call Richard Stein at 615/487-2705.

Festival—10th Annual River Roast, May 19–20, Ross's Landing, Chattanooga. Barbecue cook-off competition, music, river activities. Call 615/265-4397.

TEXAS

Conference—Annual Conference of the International Association of Culinary Professionals, April 5–9, Marriott River Center, San Antonio. Call Lynnette Ritter at 502/581-9786.

VERMONT

Festival—Vermont Maple Festival, April 21–23, St. Albans. Celebrations and exhibits centering on the maple industry. Call 802/899-5410.

VIRGINIA

Festival—27th Annual Eastern Shore Seafood Festival, May 3, Tom's Cove Campground, Chincoteague Island. Call 804/787-2460.

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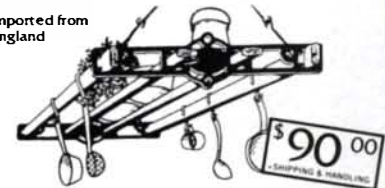
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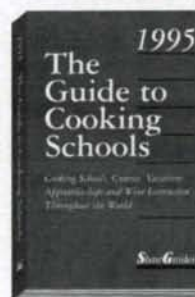
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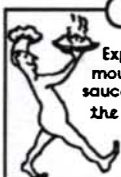
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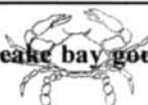


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NUTRITION INFORMATION

| Recipe (analysis per serving) | Page | Calories | | Protein (g) | Carb (g) | Fats (g) | | | | Chol (mg) | Sodium (mg) | Fiber (g) | Notes |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|------|----------|-----|----------------|-------------|----------|-----|------|------|--------------|----------------|--------------|-------------------------|
| | | total | fat | | | total | sat | mono | poly | | | | |
| Greens with Goat Cheese Croutons | 33 | 370 | 68% | 10 | 22 | 28 | 7 | 17 | 2 | 15 | 350 | 2 | 1 Tbs. vinaigrette |
| Cornish Hens with Spring Vegetables | 33 | 690 | 46% | 53 | 40 | 35 | 14 | 13 | 6 | 180 | 700 | 8 | |
| Poppy Seed Cake with Lemon Curd | 34 | 480 | 54% | 7 | 51 | 29 | 14 | 8 | 1 | 185 | 210 | 1 | 2 Tbs. lemon curd |
| Game Hens with Squash & Sage | 35 | 690 | 52% | 51 | 28 | 40 | 15 | 14 | 8 | 180 | 670 | 9 | |
| Grilled Game Hen for Summer | 35 | 340 | 62% | 26 | 6 | 23 | 5 | 13 | 4 | 75 | 310 | 2 | 2 Tbs. <i>charmoula</i> |
| Parmesan-Prosciutto Game Hens | 35 | 410 | 48% | 44 | 7 | 22 | 8 | 8 | 3 | 225 | 1480 | 1 | |
| Vegetable Stock | 39 | 30 | 0% | 1 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 190 | 1 | 1 cup |
| Mushroom Stock | 39 | 30 | 0% | 1 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 190 | 1 | 1 cup |
| Corn Stock | 39 | 15 | 0% | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 210 | 1 | 1 cup |
| Lemongrass Stock | 39 | 10 | 0% | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 170 | 1 | 1 cup |
| Rack of Lamb with Herb Crust | 44 | 470 | 58% | 41 | 7 | 30 | 9 | 16 | 2 | 135 | 290 | 1 | based on 3 portions |
| Morel Stew with Hasty Pudding | 48 | 270 | 64% | 4 | 15 | 19 | 12 | 6 | 1 | 65 | 45 | 1 | |
| Morels, Mussels & Saffron Cream | 48 | 420 | 47% | 16 | 22 | 22 | 10 | 8 | 2 | 85 | 260 | 2 | |
| Walnut Honey Bread | 52 | 90 | 36% | 2 | 12 | 3.5 | 0.5 | 1.0 | 2.5 | 0 | 160 | 1 | 1 oz. |
| Whole-Wheat Currant Rolls | 53 | 160 | 14% | 5 | 31 | 2.5 | 0.5 | 1.0 | 1.0 | 0 | 540 | 3 | 1 oz. |
| Italian Bread | 53 | 60 | 0% | 2 | 12 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 210 | 0 | 1 oz. |
| Salmon with Sheep Sorrel Sauce | 55 | 670 | 53% | 35 | 43 | 40 | 6 | 25 | 6 | 185 | 1140 | 4 | |
| White Chocolate Mousse Cake | 59 | 530 | 55% | 8 | 32 | 43 | 19 | 12 | 2 | 205 | 60 | 4 | |
| White Bean Soup with Infused Oil, Parmesan & <i>Sofregit</i> | 65 | 410 | 52% | 15 | 37 | 24 | 4 | 16 | 2 | 5 | 700 | 9 | |
| Coriander Chutney | 69 | 80 | 74% | 1 | 6 | 7 | 6 | 0.5 | 0 | 0 | 270 | 2 | ¼ cup |
| Yellow Rice with Pigeon Peas | 70 | 220 | 34% | 5 | 32 | 8 | 2 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 550 | 1 | |
| Pakistani Potato Kebabs | 70 | 70 | 61% | 1 | 6 | 4.5 | 3.0 | 1.5 | 0 | 10 | 105 | 1 | 1 kebab |
| Guacamole with Coriander | 70 | 45 | 75% | 1 | 3 | 4.0 | 0.5 | 2.5 | 0.5 | 0 | 0 | 1 | ¼ cup |
| <i>Crème Caramel</i> | 72 | 220 | 26% | 6 | 35 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 170 | 80 | 0 | |

The nutritional analyses have been calculated by a registered dietitian at The Food Consulting Company of San Diego, California. When a recipe gives a choice of ingredients, the first choice is the one used in

the calculations. Optional ingredients and those listed without a specific quantity are not included. When a range of ingredient amounts or servings is given, the smaller amount or portion is used.

A Good Loaf of Bread



Every night when I was a kid, my father carried home paper bags stuffed with fresh breads from the small New Jersey bakery where he worked. One evening, Pop asked my opinion of the pumpernickel I chewed. Only grownups talked about those things, and I sensed another obligation flowing my way. Pop began to lecture in his German accent about the different qualities of the loaves on our dinner table. I stared at the slab of bread in my hand.

Critiquing bread would now be added to my evening routine of taking out the garbage, playing the piano, and doing homework. Pop asked if I thought too much salt was used. Had the dough been kneaded properly? Why did I think one rye loaf tasted better than another? How did it look? What made a good bread?

I started to be able to identify agreeable or deficient characteristics in bread when I surrendered to my taste buds instead of trying to guess what Pop thought. He encouraged me, but hedged at total agreement with my answers because I was neglecting a vital ingredient, an ingredient that's never included with any directions, but can be tasted by anyone who participates in the act of creating. But

before Pop had a chance to lead me into the bakery to show me his process, Mom made other plans for me.

She insisted it was impossible for me to become a concert pianist or a surgeon if I baked at five in the morning. That settled the issue. Analyzing the staff of life during meals was one thing, but to beat the rising sun for Pop's life secrets wasn't on my list of priorities. Already I didn't have enough time to spend with my girlfriend and play sports. I needed fewer hours with Pop, not more. Pop stopped asking about the mysterious missing ingredient, and that was fine with me.

Pretending to play piano ended when I was a high school senior, and so did the time to learn Pop's baking secret. But when I grew up and lived on my own, there were plenty of good bakeries in my neighborhood; getting good bread was no problem.

Last year, 25 years after my nightly critiques with Pop, I finally learned his secret for creating an ideal loaf. My discovery was fueled by a hunger to eat good bread after moving to an area of New Mexico where bakeries offered only pseudo breads no more satisfying than those on supermarket shelves.

Flipping through a cookbook, I saw the picture of my desire: a plain, hard-crustured French baguette. I gathered yeast, salt, flour, and sugar to start the process.

I mixed the ingredients and threw my fingers into the gooey mass to pinch and twist it. It was such a mess that I thought it wouldn't work. Caked dough covered my arms and the blob looked as if it had oozed out of some science-fiction movie. Turning it into a smooth ball seemed impossible, but eventually the slime evolved into a shaggy clump. I used the book's kneading diagram as a guide to push, pull, turn, and slap the clump. After several minutes that seemed like hours, I felt and saw the transformation from shaggy monster to glossy sphere. The crucial stage was over. As I greased a bowl, put the dough in it, and covered it with a towel, I realized I had no baking sheet.

I tore around the house, trying to find a substitute. A piece of flagstone from my

walkway worked. Thick, yeasty aromas filled my home as I scooped the dough from the bowl with a spatula. Then I cut and molded the puffy bundle into four long, slender rectangles and arranged them on the slab. I slashed diagonal lines in the tops, brushed them with egg whites, put the flagstone in the oven, and threw in some ice cubes to ensure good crusts.

Delighted with my progress, I phoned two friends, offering cold cuts stacked between fresh baguettes. My guests arrived as I put the tanned, crisp-crustured loaves on the windowsill to cool. The crackling sounds of the crusts warmed me more than any fireplace. My friends tore the baguettes open and slapped butter on them. Their compliments pleased me, but I found myself asking the same questions Pop had asked me as I saw the hard butter melt on the feathery interior. How do they look? Is the texture too tough? Is the crust too soft? Then I tasted a chunk. It had a crunchy crust and was tender inside, but the bottom was too brown. My friends disagreed as they snatched another loaf off the windowsill.

Ignited by the experience, I made another batch the next day, improvising from the directions. This time the loaves were better.

In his wisdom, Pop knew I had to discover for myself the secret of baking good bread, and he was gracious enough not to drag me into the bakery. He understood that in a world where it takes hard work just to be mediocre, you must have passion to consistently be good. As a child eating dinner, I never would have been persuaded that love was the secret ingredient, that the act of creating and sharing, the poetry of feeling, and the compulsion to produce is what one needs to bake good bread. Time and longing allowed me to appreciate the rich pleasure of the process that results in a good loaf of bread, otherwise unavailable at any price.

—N. Jurgen Reinsuch
Las Vegas, New Mexico ♦

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